

A Magykal addition to the world of Septimus Heap

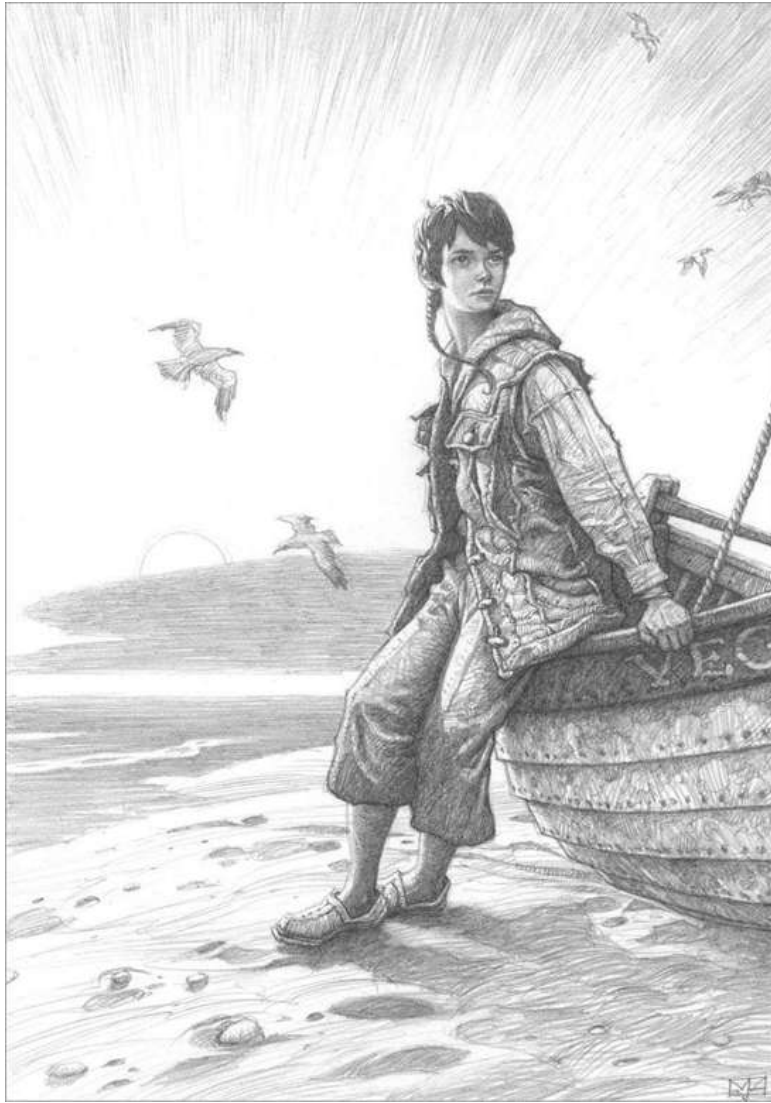
TODHUNTER MOON
— BOOK ONE —

PATHFINDER



New York Times Bestselling Author

ANGIE SAGE



TODHUNTER MOON
BOOK ONE

PATHFINDER

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DEDICATION

For Tom Wishart

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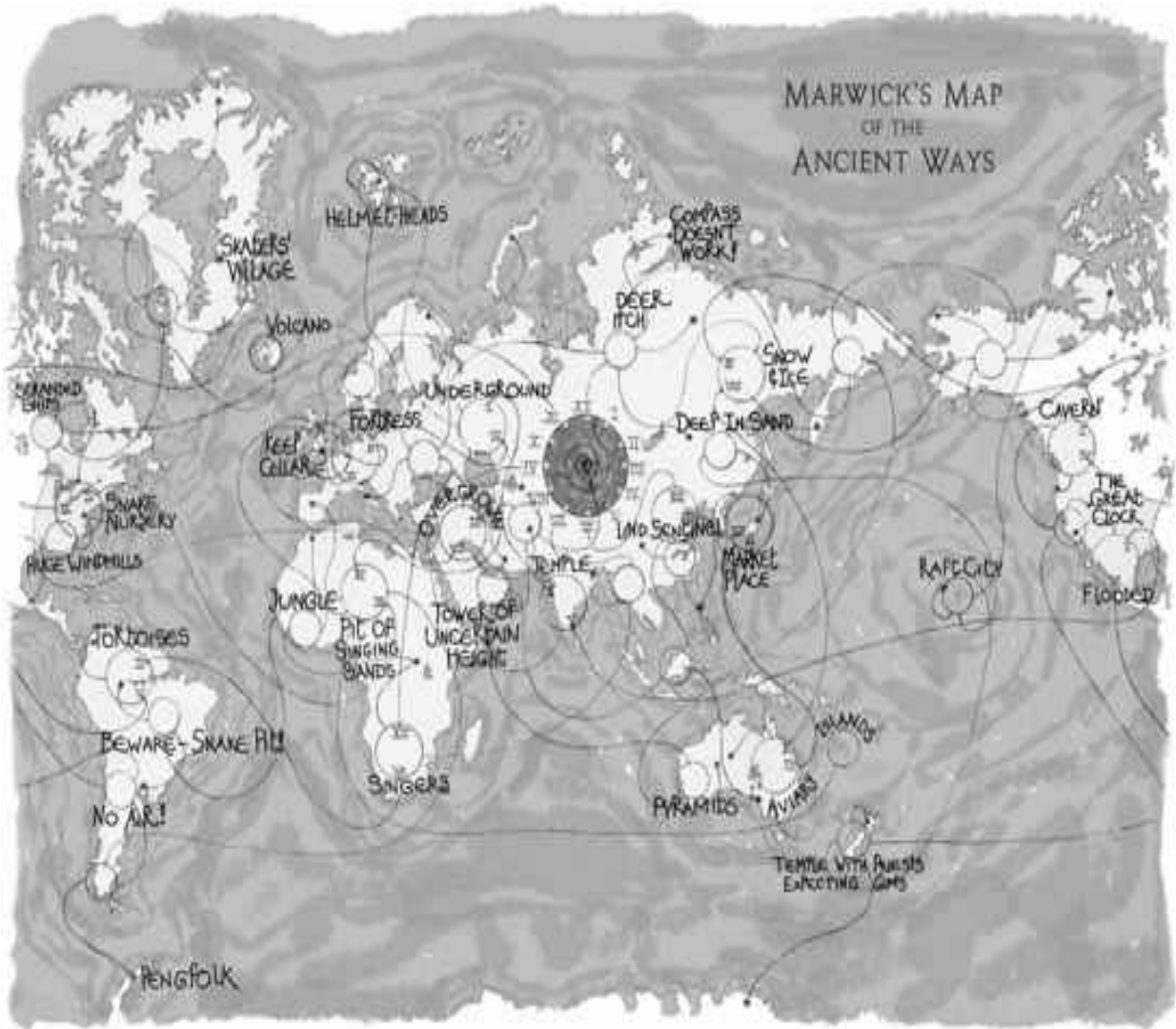
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MAPS







PART I

ON THE BEACH

A *distant bell tolled. On an ancient beach* Dan Moon watched a line of flickering lights appear and disappear as they wound through sand dunes, heading toward him. It was three o'clock in the morning on MidSummer's Day. Holding his own lantern high, Dan stood in the middle of a circle of rugs on the sand, watching the lights move closer. Dan's bare feet were cold, and despite his heavy black cloak, he shivered in the predawn chill.

Dan saw the first of the lights—a flickering candle encased in a glass lantern—emerge from the dunes. It was carried by a dark-cloaked figure who was quickly followed by others. They walked slowly across the sand, heading toward what they called the MidSummer Circle. Silently, one by one they sat down on the rugs, making a circle around Dan.

The dark-cloaked group were not the only ones making their way toward the beach. In the shadows of the dunes the square figure of a woman moved hurriedly along a path she had marked out earlier that day. The woman, Mitza Draddenmora Draa, was late. She had intended to be in her hiding place before everyone began to arrive, but she had been delayed by having to help Dan Moon pull out a pile of moth-eaten rugs from under her bed in the spare room. And, what was worse, she had to smile while she was doing it because Mitza had to be a good houseguest, and more important, be above suspicion. Consequently she was not in a good mood. She didn't like being late, she didn't like sand, she didn't like walking and she certainly didn't like what she called "darned kids." Still, it would all be worth it—she hoped.

Covered in sand after losing her footing down a dune, Mitza found her hiding place behind a small hillock of sand. It was near enough to hear what was being said and yet far enough away to make a quick exit without being seen. She settled down among the spiky dune grass and tried not to think about sand snakes.

Dan Moon, whip-thin, tall and dark, fiddled with the lapis lazuli stone that hung from a string around his neck. He had performed the MidSummer Circle more times than he liked to remember, but that night Dan was nervous—because for the first time his only child, Alice TodHunter Moon, twelve years old (and so now considered to have come of age) was old enough to hear it. Alice, who insisted on being known as Tod, was sitting at Dan’s feet, regarding him with an unflinching gaze. Her dark eyes were glowing with excitement as she twisted her long, thin plait—the traditional PathFinder elflock—that hung down from her mass of short dark hair. Just in time, she remembered not to chew the end of it.

Dan watched the last latecomer take his place. He did a head count and saw that all those from the village, aged twelve to fifteen, were indeed present. He checked his timepiece. It was important to Dan that he timed his talk to the very second. His father had never bothered, but Dan loved the sense of wonder that timing it just right always produced. It still gave even him goose bumps. He looked around the circle at the solemn audience, sitting cross-legged, muffled in their black cloaks. The younger ones had their hoods up against the chilly offshore breeze, but the older ones—too cool to cover—were toughing it out, and their faces and hair showed the typical PathFinder sheen that only became apparent in the dark.

Dan held his lantern high and saw the completed Circle of flickering points of flame. Silence had descended and with it an air of expectation. This was going to be a good night, Dan thought. The atmosphere was right. He was pleased for Tod’s sake—everyone remembered their first Circle. Dan glanced at his timepiece once more, took a deep breath and, speaking slowly but loudly enough for all to hear—including Mitza Draddenmora Draa—Dan Moon began.

“Good morning, PathFinders. Welcome to our new people.” Dan smiled down at Tod and two other twelve-year-olds, who were sitting in the space reserved for first-timers. Tod smiled shyly back. It was strange seeing her father in a new role—no longer a fisherman but someone who everyone was, literally, looking up to.

Dan continued. “Every year we meet in the early hours of MidSummer Morning to hear our history and to understand the secrets that made us PathFinders who we are, and why we are a little different from others. These secrets are kept among us, and when we leave the Circle we do not speak of them to anyone else. Does everyone here understand?” Dan did a

360-degree turn, looking at each person and getting a solemn “I understand” in return. Dan turned his gaze to the three sitting at his feet. “To begin, I will ask our first-timers to promise to keep our secrets from all who are not PathFinders, and more important, from all PathFinders who have yet to come of age and join our MidSummer Circle. You may have brothers and sisters or close friends who are only a little younger and you may feel there is no harm in telling them. But harm there is.”

Tod blushed. She knew Dan was thinking of her best friends, twins Oskar and Ferdie Sarn. But there was no way she was going to ever break the Circle promise.

One by one, Dan asked each first-timer to say the promise. Tod was last and felt very nervous by the time it was her turn. “Alice TodHunter Moon,” Dan said in a most un-Dadlike voice. “Do you promise to faithfully keep the secrets of our PathFinder Circle? For all time and in all ways?”

Tod spoke as loudly as she could manage. “I do promise to keep the secrets of the Circle.”

Dan smiled. “Well said all.” Then he addressed the rest in the Circle. “Let us welcome our new brother and sisters.”

“Welcome, brother and sisters, to the MidSummer Circle,” came the response.

Tod smiled. She belonged. It was a good feeling.

Dan relaxed. The serious part of the evening was done; now he could begin to do what he liked best—tell a story. He began to move around within the Circle, pacing slowly, speaking in his low, resonant voice while Tod listened, entranced.

“In the Days of Beyond, those distant days in the past, our ancestors went to the stars. Here on Earth they had great skills navigating what were called the Ancient Ways, and for this they were revered and called PathFinders. We no longer know what these Ancient Ways were, but we do know that because of their **PathFinding** skills, our forebears were chosen to leave this beautiful planet and find paths through the stars. They left willingly and went into a great closed metal container, a ship named *PathFinder*, which they knew they would never leave. An explosion sent the *PathFinder* up into the sky, away from our planet, past the moon, and set her on a path to the stars.”

Tod suppressed a gasp and exchanged glances of amazement with the other first-timers. She could hardly believe that Dan, such a great teller of

stories, had managed to keep the most amazing story of all secret. She stared up at the dusting of stars above, trying to imagine what it would be like to walk into a huge metal tube, knowing that you would never see the sky or the sea again. Tod pushed her bare feet into the cold sand, as if to reassure herself that she was still firmly on Earth, and listened to the comforting sound of her father's voice continuing his story.

"These people were different from those they left behind. Because in order for the *PathFinder* ship to travel fast enough to reach the stars, at first the people had to live in fluid to protect them from the terrible forces of acceleration. This is where our beautiful sign language comes from, for it is not possible to speak in fluid. And neither is it possible to breathe. So in here . . ." Dan placed his fingers on either side of the bridge of his nose. ". . . they had the things that fishes have. Gills. This was a deliberate change to the very essence of a human being, something that would be passed on to the next generation. This is why even now, many thousands of years away from our ancestors, some of us still have these gills."

Tod stared up at her father in astonishment—so *many* secrets. She tried to imagine what it would be like to immerse herself in fluid, what the first gulp would feel like. Even if she had gills, would she choke? Would she feel as though she were drowning? Tod told herself she was never going to find out. Because her mother had not been not a PathFinder, she was very unlikely to have gills. But even so, Tod had to fight hard to suppress a shudder. Like many fishermen's children, she had a horror of drowning.

Looking down directly at the first-timers, Dan said, "This is a dangerous secret that we keep from the younger ones for their own safety. As part of the Circle, you, too, will now keep the secret."

Tod and her two companions nodded solemnly.

"I know," Dan said, looking around the Circle, "that some of you will want to find out for yourselves whether you have these gills. And I know it is no good, my telling you not to do something, so I won't. But I will tell you that the only way to find out if you possess gills is . . ." Dan paused not only for dramatic effect, but also to make sure they remembered. ". . . *to be prepared to drown!*"

A gratifying gasp came from the first-timers.

Well on form now, Dan continued. "And I will tell you why you must be prepared to drown. Because human gills do not activate until you breathe in a full, deep draft of water through your nose. If you do this and you are

without gills, there is no way back. *You will drown.* And your chances of drowning are extremely high. We do not think that more than one in ten of us have gills now.”

Dan looked around the group. He smiled. As usual, the first-timers were surreptitiously sniffing, wondering if they could tell. “And before you ask, no, I do not know if I possess human gills or not. And I do not want to have to find out.”

Dan sneaked a quick look at his timepiece. He was going to have to speed up. “Our ancestors found the hidden Ways to the stars. For generations they traveled through distant galaxies, looking for worlds like ours. They danced with moons and flew with comets. They visited countless planets. On one they found an ancient civilization long dead; on another they found the stirrings of intelligent life but never, ever, did they find any creatures like us.”

Dan surveyed his audience, gazing at him in rapt attention, the first-timers openmouthed with amazement. “At last their expedition drew to a close and the *PathFinder* returned home. She landed on the very spot from which she had left, now marked by our PathFinder bell.”

Dan paused, and right on cue the sound of the bell drifted over the dunes. Tod felt a swathe of goose bumps run over her.

Dan waited until the last echoes of the bell had faded. “When the crew emerged, they found nothing but windswept dunes and a hostile crowd from the Trading Post who had seen a ball of fire drop from the sky and had come to investigate. Thousands of years on Earth had passed, compared with a few hundred on board the ship—the *PathFinder* and her crew had been forgotten. The Trading Post people thought they were strange alien creatures and imprisoned them in a fortress in the Far.” Dan waved his hand in the direction of the forest that bordered the village. “This is why we do not venture deep into the Far. It is not a good place for PathFinders.

“After many long years, the Trading Post jailers lost interest and they at last set our people free. The PathFinders returned here, built our village and lived peacefully. But the old mistrust between us remains to this day. They are a hostile people, quick to anger, and neither the Trading Post nor the OutPost is a safe place for a PathFinder to be.

“But enough of that!” Dan broke the sober atmosphere with a sudden smile. “Now, it is story time. The PathFinders brought back many tales of the unbelievable places they had seen. At each Circle I tell a different one

using our own sign language, which they passed down to us, their children's children. And tonight, Circle, I am going to tell you about the planet of the giant trees."

Dan placed the tip of his left index finger on the tip of his left thumb to make an O: the PathFinder sign for "okay" when used as a question. In reply, all in the Circle made the same sign with their right hands: *okay*, used to show agreement or that all is well. And so Dan began.

Tod sat entranced as her father wove his story with fluid hand movements, dancing around the circle on his long legs, taking them with him to the stars. She wished it would go on forever, but when his hands began to slow and his elegant fingers fluttered less fast, Tod knew he was drawing to a close.

Now Dan began to speak as well as sign, slow and low. "And so, we PathFinders have traveled to the Great Beyond. We have seen many worlds, but we have seen none as beautiful as ours; we have seen many suns, but we have seen none as perfect as . . ." Dan turned around and pointed out to the sea. Exactly on schedule, a fingernail tip of orange broke the horizon, pushing its way up from the sea. "This! This is *our* sun. This is our Earth. This is where we belong."

A shiver of goose bumps ran around the MidSummer Circle. Dan Moon grinned. He had done it.

Enjoying their sense of being special, of belonging, the Circle watched in awe as the brilliant ball of light rose from the water; they saw the sky grow bright and the morning star fade away. It was, as Dan Moon had said, perfect.

Suddenly, Tod spotted a flash of gold in the sky. She looked up, shielding her eyes. There was another flash, green this time, and Tod's heart jumped in recognition. This was something she had seen long ago. Something she had dreamed about for many years, and something that no one, not even her father, believed she had seen.

"It's the Dragon Boat!" Tod shouted, leaping to her feet. "The Dragon Boat!" Everyone looked at her disapprovingly, particularly Dan. This was not how you behaved in the Circle. But now everyone was looking at the sky, and some were standing up to get a better view. The MidSummer Circle was broken.

The flash of gold and green moved ever nearer, and now they began to see what Tod already knew it to be—a beautiful green dragon that was also

a golden boat. Or was it a beautiful golden boat that was also a green dragon?

The Dragon Boat approached steadily, her huge wings beating *up-and-down, up-and-down*, and soon she was near enough for everyone to see the dragon's neck stretched forward, her iridescent scales shining in the sunlight. They saw her tail arched high, the golden barb on the end glinting. And then her sleek golden hull was overhead; everyone was waving madly—and two figures at the helm, one in purple, one in red, returning their waves.

Dan Moon knew he had been upstaged, but he didn't mind. He was excited as anyone to have seen such an amazing sight. He swept his daughter up into a hug and said, "So, Alice TodHunter Moon, you really *did* see that Dragon Boat."

"Put me down, Dad," Tod muttered. "Everyone's looking."

THE DRAGON BOAT

The pilot of the Dragon Boat—a young man with curly straw-colored hair and green eyes so bright that you might expect them to shine in the dark—looked down at the first landfall since they had left their island.

“Hey, Jen,” he said, pointing down to the beach. “There’s that circle of lights again. That’s another MidSummer tradition going on down there, I guess.”

Jenna Heap, a young woman wearing a fine cloak of red silk lined with white fur, her long dark hair kept in place by a circlet of gold, peered over the side of the Dragon Boat. “They’ve seen us,” she said, returning the waves of the excited onlookers below. “It’s already light. We must be later than usual.”

The young man, Septimus Heap—Jenna Heap’s adoptive brother—smiled. “I seem to remember someone was fussing about whether we had enough food.” He pointed at two large picnic baskets strapped to the deck. “Even though we have enough to feed the entire House of Foryx.”

Jenna resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at Septimus. She was twenty-one now, she told herself sternly, she was the Castle Queen and it *would not do*. Particularly now, she thought, as she looked at Septimus’s purple wool cloak lined with indigo fur and the thick gold-and-platinum belt he wore around his purple tunic, that he was the Castle’s ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Which Jenna—and even Septimus himself—still found hard to believe.

Like those in the Circle on the beach below, Jenna was performing a MidSummer tradition. Every MidSummer Day for many thousands of years, Castle Queens had visited the Dragon Boat where she had lain in an ancient temple beneath the ground, hidden there by the Castle’s first-ever ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Hotep-Ra. But times changed and when Jenna was eleven years old, she and Septimus had flown the Dragon Boat back to the Castle. And now that Jenna was herself Queen and Septimus was able to freely visit Hotep-Ra, every MidSummer Day they took the Dragon Boat to

see her old master, Hotep-Ra. It was a time both Jenna and Septimus looked forward to, a precious space where they could be themselves once more—just brother and sister, plain Jenna and Septimus Heap.

This year was even more precious. Because Septimus was now ExtraOrdinary Wizard, he had been reluctant to go. However, the Castle Queen had insisted on it. Septimus still wore the gold-and-emerald Dragon Ring that made him master of the Dragon Boat, and therefore it was his duty, Jenna had told him sternly. And so Septimus had left behind an assortment of deputies in the Castle's Wizard Tower—both ghostly and human—and hoped that everything would be all right.

And now, as the orange ball of the sun turned the sky a luminous pink and a flight of ducks flew quacking across their path, Septimus laughed out loud. He was so pleased that Jenna had insisted.

DISCOVERED

Later, as Tod and Dan were wandering home along the beach, watching the early-morning sparkle of sunlight glancing off the MidSummer waves, Tod said, “Dad, why do you suppose Aunt Mitza was hiding in the dunes while we had our Circle?”

“Was she?” Dan Moon looked at Tod uneasily.

Tod nodded. “Yes. When everyone was waving at the Dragon Boat, I saw her get up and scurry away. And I know it was her, because she waddles like a duck. Like this.” Tod did an accurate impression of Aunt Mitza’s flat-footed walk, but Dan Moon was not amused.

“You must respect your elders, Tod.”

“But I don’t like her, Dad. And neither do you.”

Dan Moon did not deny it. “Even so, Tod, you must give your mother’s stepsister respect. We must both show her hospitality.”

Tod fell quiet. Her mother had died when she was only five and Tod knew that anything relating to her mother was precious to Dan—as it was to her, too. She knew that was the only reason that Dan had made Aunt Mitza welcome when she had turned up on the doorstep the previous week, expressing a wish to meet “her darling little step-niece” after all these years. But Aunt Mitza’s sharp-eyed looks when Dan was not around had not endeared her to Tod. Unlike Dan, she drew the line at Aunt Mitza. Tod could not believe her mother had ever liked her stepsister, and she was sure that her mother would not have tolerated Aunt Mitza eavesdropping on their secrets.

“But Aunt Mitza was listening in on our Circle, Dad,” said Tod. “She heard our secret—the one we all promised never to tell. That’s not respecting *us*, is it? Or our hospitality. Or Mum.”

Dan Moon frowned. “What’s heard is heard. It can’t be undone. But you are right, Tod. She has not respected your mother. Tomorrow I will ask her to leave.”

But it wasn’t Mitza who left the next day. It was Dan.



PART II

THE HOUSE OF FORYX

The *Dragon Boat* flew steadily eastward. She knew the way perfectly, and all Jenna and Septimus needed to do was to watch the world going by and eat their way through the first picnic basket. It was late morning when they saw the grim fortress where Hotep-Ra lived. The octagonal granite towers of the House of Foryx, dark against the perpetual snow that surrounded them, reared up from a pillar of rock surrounded by an abyss. Both Jenna and Septimus shivered—the House of Foryx was an eerie place.

The *Dragon Boat* flew lower. She circled the House of Foryx once, then her long neck dipped down and she went in to land. Jenna shut her eyes—this part always scared her. The *Dragon Boat* was heading for a wide, white terrace of marble, and even though Jenna knew it would be all right, it felt as if they were about to crash into solid stone. But as the *Dragon Boat*'s keel touched down, the marble changed into a milky liquid and they landed softly with a long, low *shishhhh*.

Septimus brushed down his purple robes and tightened his gold-and-platinum ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt. This was the first time he had met Hotep-Ra in his role as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and he wanted to look his best.

Jenna put the landing ladder over the side and gave Septimus a hug. “You’ve got the **Questing Stone**?” she asked—as she always did.

“Jen, don’t be a pest. Of course I do.”

“Show me,” Jenna insisted, remembering the one terrifying day that Septimus had left the **Questing Stone** in the boat. She had gone racing after him with it and had only just reached him in time.

Septimus put his hand in his pocket and held out an iridescent black stone, round and smooth, with a gold “Q” set into it. He flipped it over and showed her Hotep-Ra’s own symbol **Magykally** incised into the back. This was Septimus’s key to freedom; it allowed him to come out of the House of Foryx safely back into his own Time.

“Good,” said Jenna. “Nervous?”

Septimus gave Jenna a strained smile. “A bit,” he admitted. “I’m wondering if I might see him—I mean, *me*—this time.”

“Do you think you might?”

“Yeah, I do. When I did see me—I mean, *him*—my robes looked really new.”

“It will be fine,” Jenna said reassuringly. “Just don’t touch him—I mean, you. That’s the important thing, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And I didn’t touch him or me then, so I know it’s okay. Well, it was then. But who knows, maybe it will be different this time. Right, here goes. I’ll see you in a sec.” With that, Septimus swung himself onto the ladder and a few moments later was hurrying off across the marble terrace toward the forbidding gray fortress.

Jenna watched him stride up to a towering door made from great planks of ebony held together with iron bars and rivets. It looked, she thought, like the door to a prison—and it was, in a way. The House of Foryx, built by Hotep-Ra, was the place where All Times Do Meet. Here in the house, Time stood still, like a hub at the center of a spinning wheel. And although those in the House of Foryx were free to leave whenever they chose, they could not choose the Time in which they would appear. Only a person in possession of a completed **Questing Stone** could do this—and Septimus had the only one.

A flurry of snow swept across the terrace, and through it Jenna saw Septimus reach up and tug the bellpull. She saw the door open and the little batlike doorman step aside to let him pass. Then the door closed and Septimus was gone.

Jenna hated this part of their visit; she was always afraid she would never see Septimus again. To take her mind off things, she set about rigging up a red-and-gold awning over the Dragon Boat. Then when Septimus came out, however hard the snow might fall, however chill the wind might blow, they would sit with Hotep-Ra under the awning and have the lunch that she had brought. This was how it always went, and this, she told herself, was how it would be today.

DOPPELGÄNGER

Inside the House of Foryx, Septimus found himself in a small lobby with a black-and-white checkerboard floor and a striking chair carved in the shape of a dragon. He pushed open the lobby door—which always opened more easily than he expected it to—and hurtled into the vast candlelit entrance hall. He stood for a moment to collect his thoughts and breathed in the strange, stagnant air of the place where All Times Do Meet. The entrance hall was wreathed in candle smoke and crowded with people milling around, some plucking up the courage to go out, some disoriented by having just—or so it felt to them—come in, but most of them in a Timeless daze, hardly knowing who or where they were anymore.

Septimus could see little through the smoky haze that always hung around this place, but as he pushed his way through the crowd he could not help but glance anxiously up to the balustraded landing above. His heart missed a beat—*he was there*. His younger, fourteen-year-old self was up on the landing, staring down at him in dismay. Septimus gulped. Soon he would meet himself, just as he had done seven years previously. Since that meeting he had learned many things about meeting oneself in an earlier time—that one must not touch the other; that one may speak but not the other; that, above all, he must not change *anything whatsoever* about the meeting that had, for him, already happened and had made him who he was right then. As Septimus began to climb the stairs toward his past, there was so much he wanted to say to the fourteen-year-old Septimus. He wished he'd said more, but at least, he thought, he had managed to blurt out the most important thing of all.

The wide, sweeping staircase curved elegantly upward. As he climbed higher the candle smoke cleared and Septimus looked up, straight into the eyes of . . . *himself*. Septimus saw that his younger self was now shaking hands with Hotep-Ra; now he was turning to go and looking just as spooked as his present self felt.

Two steps below Hotep-Ra, both the Septimuses stopped.

They must not touch. The older Septimus held up his hands to stop the younger from coming closer. He tried to appear cool and in control but he came across, he thought, like a prized dillop. He had thought that then and he thought it now.

One may speak but not the other. “Whoa,” he said. “Don’t speak. Bit dangerous, Timewise, apparently. I wondered when we’d meet—if it might be this Time.” He was pleased that everything seemed to be going just as he remembered it had seven years back. “Marcia’s fine,” he said. “And that is all you want to know right now.”

The young Septimus gave him a relieved half smile, hesitated, then ran off down the stairs. Septimus watched himself in his scruffy green Apprentice robes thread his way through the crowded hall below.

He must not change anything whatsoever. He waited for himself to glance back up and then he waved. The young Septimus returned his wave and was gone. Out to another Time, out to a different world.

GOING OUT

There are many things that a brand-new ExtraOrdinary Wizard will want to ask the very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and Septimus was no exception. He spent what felt to him like many hours of House of Foryx Time with Hotep-Ra up in the old Wizard's rooms. When at last Septimus had asked all his questions, Hotep-Ra said eagerly, "I think it is time for lunch, do you not, Septimus?" Hotep-Ra had become rather fond of the picnics that Jenna made.

The two ExtraOrdinary Wizards threaded their way through the crowds of the hazy entrance hall and went into the lobby. The dragon chair was now occupied by a striking girl dressed in white furs. Septimus noticed she had brilliant blue fingernails and her white-blond hair was dressed in tiny braids gathered into a thick ponytail. The girl sprang to her feet and grabbed hold of Septimus's arm. "Tell me, please," she said in a heavily accented voice. "You are the man with the **Magyk** stone, aren't you? You always go out into the Time you came in?"

Septimus clutched the **Questing Stone** tightly in his hand, afraid that the girl might try to grab it. "Yes, I am. And I do."

The girl looked deep into Septimus's eyes. He was mesmerized. "Please, oh please, I beg of you," she said. "Take me Out."

Hotep-Ra did not like the prospect of his precious lunch with his Dragon Boat and his favorite Queen being disrupted. "Madam, you are in no need of being 'Taken Out,' as you put it. You are free to leave at any time."

The girl glared at the old man. "I don't want *any* Time. I want *his* Time."

Septimus knew how the girl felt. He, too, had once been terrified of which Time he would step out into, but it was a terror that Hotep-Ra would never understand. "Of course you may Come Out with me," he said. "It would be a pleasure." He would have offered her his arm, but she already had it.

TAXI

Jenna was still trying to put up the awning when she saw Septimus emerge from the House of Foryx with—*who was that?* Jenna frowned. What was Septimus thinking, bringing someone—some new girlfriend, no doubt—to intrude on their precious time together? From the expression on Hotep-Ra’s face she could see that the ancient Wizard was no happier about it than she was.

Their guest introduced herself as the Snow Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful. “But I am known to my friends,” she said, settling down in the Dragon Boat and kicking off her fur boots to reveal long white feet with bright blue toenails, “as Driffa.” She bestowed a glittering smile on her three companions. “And I hope that you will consider yourselves as my friends.”

“Of course we will,” said Septimus. Jenna and Hotep-Ra smiled icily.

Hotep-Ra thawed a little at the sight of the salmon mousse and elderflower champagne, but he said little—the Snow Princess spoke enough words for them all. She told them how she had gone to the House of Foryx to find an ancestor who had asked her to meet her there. After giving her a frightening message, her great-great (and then some) grandmother had told Driffa to wait for “a beautiful blond young man in purple who had a **Magyk** stone.” Driffa had waited for what felt like centuries until Septimus had at last appeared.

The Snow Princess put her thin white hand on Septimus’s and said, “I can never thank you enough for Going Out with me. Never.” Driffa reclined languidly, so that snowflakes fell onto her upturned face. She breathed in deeply. “Ah,” she murmured. “I had forgotten the smell of snow.”

Septimus gazed at Driffa, entranced. Hotep-Ra and Jenna exchanged exasperated glances.

Hotep-Ra did not linger. Jenna was waving him good-bye, watching the dark door of the House of Foryx close upon the old Wizard once more,

when she heard Septimus saying, “It would be our pleasure to take you home, Driffa. I have always wanted to see the Eastern SnowPlains.”

Jenna bit back a retort of *Since when?* and gave Septimus one of her Queenly disapproving stares. It had no effect.

The Snow Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful, was not a good passenger. She spent most of the journey lying prone on the deck of the Dragon Boat, groaning loudly. She protested whenever Jenna roused her to ask for directions, and when she looked out to see where they were, she was promptly sick over the side. “All down the lovely gold leaf,” Jenna complained to Septimus. It took two swelteringly hot days and two bitterly cold nights to reach the Eastern SnowPlains. Night was falling when they at last reached the place that the Snow Princess recognized as home—a high snow-covered plain surrounded by mountains, where the air was thin and the wind blew with a low-pitched moan.

“There! I see it. Our Blue Pinnacle!” Driffa called out.

Septimus and Jenna peered out through the snow clouds and glimpsed what looked like a spire of pure lapis lazuli shooting up from the snow. Then the snow closed in and everything became a dull white once more.

Driffa turned to Septimus, her dark blue eyes shining with excitement. “Can you not feel its wonderful **Enchantment?**”

Septimus could feel an **Enchantment**, but he would not have called it wonderful. It felt **Darke** to him. Unwilling to upset the Snow Princess, he used the opaque Wizard-talk that he had recently acquired to get him out of situations he did not entirely understand. “I am sure there is many a wonderful **Enchantment** in this *enchanted* place.”

“Oh,” said Driffa, and she blushed.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Jenna muttered under her breath. Ever since Septimus’s longtime girlfriend Rose had dumped him for a certain scribe named Foxy, Septimus had turned into what Jenna considered to be an outrageous flirt.

The glimpse of the Blue Pinnacle—**Enchanted** or otherwise—was enough to guide the Snow Princess home. As the Dragon Boat dropped down through the clouds they caught a brief glimpse of beautiful snow-covered towers soaring up from the foothills and the welcoming glow of lanterns strung out along delicate walkways, but then a blizzard came howling in and they were lost from view.

There was nowhere for the Dragon Boat to land, but Septimus took her down until she was hovering a few feet above the snow. Jenna threw out the landing ladder and slipped into graceful-Queen mode, something she was extremely good at after seven years' practice. "Snow Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful," she said. "It was our pleasure and privilege to return you to your beautiful country. We wish you much happiness among your kin. Farewell."

Determined to outdo Jenna's speech, the Snow Princess replied, "Oh, Castle Queen and ExtraOrdinary Wizard, you are truly the most generous of beings and I thank you from the soles of my feet to the top of my head. May your snowfall be soft and your skies be blue. May the Grula-Grula guide you true."

Septimus was puzzled at the mention of "Grula-Grula." He wanted to ask the Snow Princess what she meant, but one look at Jenna's expression told him that his Castle Queen wanted their passenger gone. Obediently, Septimus helped the Snow Princess onto the ladder. She held his hand for as long as possible and then she dropped down into the soft snow below and was gone, her white furs blending into the blizzard.

"I hope she will be all right," Septimus said.

"People like that usually are," Jenna observed.

Septimus took the Dragon Boat low across the center of the SnowPlain to take another look at the intriguing Blue Pinnacle. As they drew near, the clouds briefly parted.

"Crumbs," said Jenna. "What's that?"

Beside the Blue Pinnacle was what looked like an ant nest. A huge mound of black spoil lay upon on the snow, and lines of figures were emerging from a great gash in the ground, slowly pushing barrows of dirt and rock.

Septimus frowned. "There is a **Darke Magyk** down there for sure," he said.

Suddenly a ball of flame shot into the air and headed straight for them. Septimus pushed the tiller across to take evasive action, but there was no need. The Dragon Boat had seen a **ThunderFlash** before and she knew what was coming. She heeled over in a rapid turn and the ball of fire shot past, spinning as it went, the heat melting the ice on the deck.

Two more missiles came after them, but the Dragon Boat was out of reach. The snowstorm closed around them once more and Jenna made her

way forward to the prow. She put her arms around the dragon's ice-cold neck and whispered, "Take us home."

WAITING

Two nights later the Dragon Boat flew over the PathFinders' sandspit once again. This time there was no circle of lights. But down below on the beach in the darkness, someone was there.

It was Tod. She was sitting beside her father's empty boat, waiting.

At dawn the previous morning, Dan Moon had gone fishing. It had been a fine day and Tod had helped him stow the nets and push his boat, *Vega*, down the beach. She had watched him sail slowly out, and when his red sail disappeared around the headland Tod had wandered off to have breakfast with her friends, the Sarn family. Even though Aunt Mitza had gone out that morning, Tod had no wish to go home, in case she came back unexpectedly.

Many PathFinders had gone fishing that day. Tod returned to the beach in the evening with other villagers, watching the boats come in until the only one not come home was her father's. Darkness began to fall and the evening breeze blew in, but still there was no sign of Dan. Oskar and Ferdie Sarn joined her, bringing blankets and hot drinks. The long night passed slowly with nothing but an empty sea before them.

In the gray light of early dawn, Tod saw the unmistakable shape of Dan's boat drifting toward the shore. But one look told her that there was no one on board. *Vega's* sail hung loose and she meandered along with the waves, rocking back and forth.

Jerra Sarn—Oskar and Ferdie's elder brother—took Tod out to fetch *Vega* and together, they pulled her up onto the sand. All that remained of Dan was his sodden fishing vest lying in a pool of water at the bottom of his boat. There were no nets, no fish and absolutely no sign of Dan.

Tod put on Dan's fishing vest and refused to leave the beach. The Sarns took turns keeping her company but Tod did not care who was with her—the only person she wanted to see was her father. She sat steadfastly staring at the sea, watching for Dan. Ferdie and Oskar did not understand why—for surely Dan had drowned? And Tod, keeping the Circle promise, did not tell

them. But Jerra Sarn, who had been at the MidSummer Circle for the last time three days earlier, understood what Tod was hoping for.

And so, as the Dragon Boat flew overhead, Tod sat dreaming that any moment Dan Moon would break the surface of the water and come wading out to her to tell her that yes, he had PathFinder gills. Time and again Tod imagined how he would look—draped with seaweed, shivering, but alive. She dreamed of how they would help him up the beach and take him home, and how Dan would tell them stories of his strange walk home along the seabed, home to his little Alice, and that everything was all right now.

But when the sun rose over the sea for the second day, Dan had not come home, Tod was still waiting, and nothing was right.



PART III

Two months later

A STORM BREWING

Dusk was falling. With her elflock flicking across her face in the wind, her short dark hair a tangled mess, Tod struggled to drag Dan's unwieldy fishing boat out of the sea.

A barefoot, redheaded boy wearing, like Tod, a hooded black-striped top and cutoff black trousers—or “trews,” as the PathFinders called them—ran down the sloping beach toward her, the roar of the surf drowning out his voice.

“Tod! Hey, Tod! Wait. I'll help.”

Suddenly Tod saw a pair of sun-browned hands next to hers on the rope, pulling hard. At once the boat felt lighter and began to break free of the tug of the backwash. “Oskar! Hey, *thanks*.”

Together Tod and Oskar pulled *Vega* out of the waves and hauled her up the sand, until they reached a chain that snaked up the beach to a post driven deep into the dunes. Oskar's freckled, sunburned face glistened with salt water and his blue eyes with their distinctive yellow flecks crinkled into a smile. “She's heavy,” he puffed. He waited while Tod roped the boat to the chain with two seamanlike knots. “Good catch?” he asked.

Tod ran her hand across her eyes, brushing away the sticky salt. She smiled wearily. “Yeah,” she said, and leaned into the boat to grab a large basket full to the brim with fish. “Not that Aunt Mitza will think so.”

Oskar made a face. “No pleasing some people,” he said. “Here, let me.” He reached in and helped her haul the basket out. “You taking your nets in tonight?” he asked.

“No, they're okay.”

Tod and Oskar trudged up the steep sandy beach, the basket of fish between them. At the top of the beach, where the sand dunes began, they put the basket down and turned to look back at the sea, wide and empty before them. The sun was setting, leaving behind a band of pale green cloud adrift in a pink sky. The afternoon wind had died away but the sea was what Tod called “edgy”—a dark, disturbed blue. “There's a storm coming,” she said.

They followed the board path that led through the dunes to the settlement of houses scattered behind them in the lee of the wind. Made from tar-painted planks, the PathFinder houses were simple buildings, one room built upon another and set onto stilts, reaching up to the stars. Now, in the twilight, the houses looked like strange, dark creatures striding between the dunes, the candles in their windows flickering like watchful eyes.

Tod and Oskar came to Bell Square, a wide-open space in the center of which was a tall wooden frame that supported the PathFinder Bell. This bell was reputed to be from the ancient ship that had taken them to the stars. Many tracks led off from the square and one of these went to Tod's house, another to Oskar's. "I'd ask you to come and have supper with us," Oskar said, "but—"

"I'm not allowed," Tod finished for him. "Thanks anyway, Oskie. You know I'd love to." Tod thought of the ghastly Aunt Mitza waiting for her to come home. She thought of the scowl that would greet her and suddenly, without thinking, she found herself saying, "Why don't *you* come and have supper with *me*?"

Oskar looked shocked. "But what about Aunt Mitza?"

Tod shrugged. "What about her? I've caught *tons* of fish. I'm going to cook it—as usual. She's going to eat it—as usual. What's for her to complain about?"

Oskar thought that there would be *him* to complain about for a start, but he said nothing. If Tod wanted him to come to supper, then come to supper he would. Oskar guessed his mother would not be pleased—nowadays she liked all her children to be home before dark, but he knew he could win her over. "I'll go and tell Ma," he said. "I'll be at your place in ten minutes."

Tod smiled. "Great!"

Tod lugged the fish basket along the narrow track, damp and dark in the twilight. At the far end her house stood alone, tall and proud on its stilts, with bright green shutters and Tod's long, low attic room looking out to sea, crowned by a neat reed-thatched roof that Dan had renewed only a few weeks before he had disappeared.

Tod's arms were aching when at last she reached the foot of the stepladder that led up to her house. She put down the basket and looked up to the doorway above. The door was open and a light shone from inside. It looked so welcoming that for a moment Tod felt a flicker of hope that her father had come back—that when she walked through that door Dan would

be there and once again sweep her up into his arms. It had been two months now since Dan Moon had gone fishing and never come back. Sometimes it felt like only yesterday, and sometimes it felt like forever.

Aunt Mitza had compounded Tod's misery by staying on at the house. *Because it is my duty to be here, Alice, that is why*, she would say whenever Tod asked her why she didn't *go away and leave her alone*. And Tod knew that Aunt Mitza would indeed be there, sitting in her chair as ever, gazing out to the Far.

Tod shook away the sad thoughts about her father and picked up the basket of fish. She heaved it up the ladder and stopped in the doorway to get her breath back. Her father wasn't home, of course. *He* wouldn't have listened to her bringing up the fish without lifting a finger to help. She looked at the space beside the door where Dan's big seaboots had once stood—it was as empty as it had been when she left at dawn that morning. A wave of sadness overwhelmed Tod and she dropped the fish basket with a despairing *thud*.

From a winged chair in the shadows Aunt Mitza sprang to her feet. She stormed over to Tod, her black eyes staring out from her flat, red face, which was pulled taut by the dark hair scraped savagely up into a bun on the top of her head. She bristled with fury. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded. "Banging the fish down like that—are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"No," said Tod, thinking that wasn't such a bad idea. "I'm just bringing in the fish. Like I *always* do."

Aunt Mitza stared angrily at Tod. Tod returned the stare, determined not to blink first. Aunt Mitza looked away. "You'll be sorry," she said, turning on her heel and going back to the tall chair in the shadows.

Tod shrugged. She picked up the basket and went over to the cooking area. She selected three good-sized mackerel for the night's supper and laid them on the fish stone, then she took the rest out to the fish store—a box filled with ice (which every morning Tod heaved up from the icehouse and crushed) attached to the outside wall. Just as Tod had watched Dan doing, she gently laid the catch on the layers of ice, then sprinkled them with more ice. The fish would keep for about five days, although they always tasted best on the first day.

To the background *click-click-click* of Aunt Mitza's irritable knitting needles, Tod lit the fire in the stove, gutted the mackerel, and put them in

the large black pan to gently fry. Then she went over to the table beside the window that looked out toward the marsh flats of the old lagoon at the back, which had once been one of her favorite places to sit and read. Tod threw her best red-checked cloth over the rough wood, laid three places for supper and waited for trouble. It wasn't long coming.

"*Three?*" asked Aunt Mitza, eagle-eyed as ever.

"I've asked Oskar Sarn for supper."

"Well, you can just *un-ask* him." Aunt Mitza threw down her knitting and set off toward the door. Tod knew what she was going to do—pull up the ladder so Oskar could not get in. She raced after her, but there was no need. At that very moment Oskar's cheery face peered in at the door.

It was not the most fun supper Oskar had ever had, but he would do anything for Tod, even if it meant spending a whole evening in the company of the dreaded Aunt Mitza. However, the evening was not as long as Oskar had expected. As soon as they had finished the fish—and before Oskar had time to point out that they hadn't even unwrapped the cake his mother had given him to bring for pudding—Aunt Mitza scraped back her chair and stood up. "It's late," she said. "Oskar Sarn, it's time you went home."

Tod frowned. "It's not at all late," she objected. "Oskar's only just got here."

Aunt Mitza folded her arms and stared at Tod. "Alice TodHunter Moon. If I say it is late, it is *late*." She scowled at Oskar. "And if you know what's good for you, Oskar Sarn, you will go home *right now*."

Oskar felt terrible. He hated the thought of leaving Tod alone with someone who so obviously loathed her. And yet he knew if he stayed he would only make things worse for Tod. He got up from the table and, deliberately not looking at Aunt Mitza, gave Tod a strained smile. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

Aunt Mitza burst out laughing as though Oskar had made a joke. "Say good-bye, Oskar Sarn," she said. "Say *good-bye*."

Despondently, Oskar climbed down the ladder. The wind was blowing in from the sea strongly now, whisking sharp grains of sand off the dunes and sending them flicking across his skin. Oskar pulled his night cloak around him against the sand. His mother had insisted that Jerra came to meet him and walk home with him after supper, but his brother was not due for almost two hours, and there was no way Oskar was going to hang

around waiting. His head down against the wind, Oskar set off quickly, following the track back along the sandspit.

As he trudged on, accompanied by the mournful rattle of the hollow dune grasses, all he could think about was the expression on Tod's face when she had waved him good-bye. She had looked so . . . Oskar tried to find the right word. The nearest he could come up with was "alone," but that didn't explain everything. No, he thought, there was something else—something new. Underneath it all, Tod had looked *scared*.

IN THE DUNES

Oskar, unlike Tod, still had both his parents—and until recently his home had been a happy place. But one dark night, a month after Dan Moon's fishing boat had floated back without him, Oskar and his little brother, Torr, with whom he shared his room, had been woken by their mother's screams. Oskar's twin sister, Ferdie, was *gone*. When he closed his eyes Oskar could still see Ferdie's bedroom window wide open and the soft summer rain blowing in onto her empty bed. All night Oskar and Jerra—along with his parents and their neighbors—had searched for her. They had found huge animal tracks in the sand outside Ferdie's window, which had led onto the main boardwalk, but after, nothing. The next day Oskar went out alone. Oskar was a skilled tracker, and despite the night's rain, he saw a few tracks going into the Far. An expedition set off but the trail disappeared. Ferdie was indeed gone.

But now, as Oskar pushed home against the rising wind, his mind was taken up not with Ferdie, but Tod. He remembered the scared look in her eyes, and Oskar had a feeling that, try as he might, he could not shake off: *something really bad was about to happen to Tod*.

Oskar needed time to think, time to work out what to do. He knew that as soon as he got home, any thoughts about Tod would be eaten up by his parents' sadness. He had plenty of time to walk home the long way by the salt marsh—a dried-up lake just beyond the village. He knew he could easily be home before Jerra had left. Oskar loved the feeling of peace that the ancient PathFinder ghosts who wandered the marshes gave him. Maybe he would find some tonight; maybe he could even ask them what to do. Surely an ancient ghost would know?

It was the dark of the moon, a night when the PathFinders traditionally left lights in their windows until morning. As Oskar followed the boarded path, which weaved its way between the tree-trunk stilts of the houses, he felt as though he were walking through a mystical woodland, while above him the candle flames flickered like tiny stars falling to earth. It was

beautiful, but it was also eerily empty. Since Ferdie had been taken, people did not go out much at night and all the ladders were drawn up so there was none of the easy comings and goings between the houses that had once happened.

With the quiet buzz of conversation in lilting PathFinder voices drifting down, Oskar headed along the track between the straggle of outlying houses. The wind was behind him and sent him quickly along. Soon he was leaving the lights and houses behind and following a narrow path as it dipped down into the cool darkness between the dunes. Even now, Oskar did not mind the dark; he knew the paths with his eyes closed and he enjoyed the feeling of invisibility that his night cloak gave him as his feet found their way across the weathered planks sunk into the sand. Silently Oskar padded along and soon the gentle *peep-peep* of waterbirds digging for worms on the marsh told him that he was very nearly there.

It was then, above the peepings, that Oskar became aware of a strange sound—a hoarse, breathy panting. He stopped dead. Knowing that, like many PathFinders, his skin and red hair had a sheen at night, Oskar pulled up the hood of his cloak; then he crouched down into the sandy darkness and listened.

Oskar could read the land like Tod could read the sea. He felt a few grains of sand skitter down; he heard the crackle of the dry dune grasses somewhere above him and he sensed the vibrations of large but light-footed creatures. Oskar figured that they were walking on all fours and, from the hesitant way they were moving, it seemed to him that they were unsure where to go.

The creatures drew to a halt and Oskar realized that they were almost directly above him. He froze. He suspected that the merest twitch of a muscle would get him noticed—and there was something about these creatures that made Oskar very certain that being noticed by them was the last thing he wanted to happen.

Click-clicker-click.

A low series of clicks were coming from the top of the dune. Oskar listened, recognizing three distinct tones flicking in and out of what seemed to be some kind of discussion. He suppressed a shiver. The clicks were so foreign, so inhumanly mechanical, that they scared a very ancient part of his being. But what frightened Oskar most was something much more recent—the memory of a late-night conversation he had overheard between his

parents not long after Ferdie had gone. “Jonas, I’m telling you, I heard *clicks*,” he remembered his mother saying. “Like this—” Oskar’s mother had made rapid clicking noises with her tongue. “I thought it was one of Oskie’s mechanical toys. You know how Ferdie liked—no, no, *likes*—to borrow Oskie’s stuff. Oh, if only I’d gone in to see what it was. If *only . . .*”

Click. Click-clicker-click.

Oskar went cold. He knew that just a few feet above him were the creatures that had taken Ferdie.

Click-click-clicker-click.

And now they were back. Who had they come for this time?

Clicker-click.

He remembered Aunt Mitza’s parting instruction: “Say good-bye, Oskar Sarn. Say *good-bye*.”

Oskar knew the answer: they had come for Tod.

THE RACE

Click-click-clicker-click.

Oskar felt a rising terror. He decided that the only way to stop the panic was to see what was above him. The reality could be no worse than the images that were filling his head. Very slowly, Oskar looked up—and wished he hadn't.

Oskar's night vision showed him far more than he wished to see. Three beings, with wide, flat heads like those of a giant snake, stood at the top of the dune. Taller than a man, whip-thin yet muscular and as eerily white as deep-sea denizens that had never seen the light, they were half crouched on two powerful back legs; their smaller front legs—which had almost human hands—were off the ground, giving them an air of indecision. Their big heads were nodding in time with their *click-clicker-clicks* and a sudden dart of a forked black tongue, glistening with slime, made Oskar's mouth go dry with fear.

Oskar recognized the creatures at once as Garmin. There was a drawing of them in one of his favorite books, *Magykal, Mystikal and Mythikal Creatures: Facts*. He was shocked. He had no idea Garmin actually existed.

Clicker-click. Clicker-click.

But the Garmin were as real as he was. Oskar could see the page in his book as though it were in front of him:

Garmin

Predator. Extruder. Nonvenomous. Nocturnal. Cave-dwelling.

Covering: White skin. Minimal hair.

Oskar took a little comfort from “nonvenomous,” but that was outweighed by “predator.” He was trying to remember what “extruder” meant when another shower of earth came flying down. Suddenly the Garmin took off, their powerful back legs sending them leaping swiftly

across the top of the dunes—heading for Tod’s house. A stab of fear ran through Oskar. The Garmin were going so fast that they would be there in no time at all. Oskar knew he had to get to Tod before the creatures did.

Oskar’s only chance of reaching Tod first was to take the Burrows—direct routes through the dunes. Many were roofed over with planks and some actually burrowed through the sand. The Garmin would have to run up and down the hills, but by using the Burrows, Oskar could cut straight through. He raced off at top speed and was soon heading for the nearest Burrow. Oskar’s parents had forbidden him to use the Burrows, as there had been a lethal sand-snake infestation some years earlier, but right then, Oskar didn’t care about sand snakes. He reached the mouth of the Burrow, took his light stick from his pocket, snapped it open and dived inside. The dim green light of the stick showed just enough to stop him from cannoning into the sandy walls and, he hoped, to scare any remaining sand snakes away. Barefoot, Oskar ran fast, feeling the damp sand cold beneath his feet and hearing the muffled *thub-thubber-thub* of his footsteps. He was soon out of the Burrow and into the night air, heading for the next one, careering into a steep-sided canyon between two dunes, the sharp-edged grass cutting his legs as he ran. But Oskar felt nothing—nothing except for the terror of *being too late*.

Three long minutes later, Oskar emerged from a particularly low Burrow onto the old cinder track that led up from the rock pools at the end of the fishing beach. He paused very briefly to catch his breath and orient himself: *Tod’s house should just be visible from here*, he thought. And sure enough, it was. To Oskar’s surprise, the tall house standing alone was remarkably easy to spot—it was lit up like a MidWinter Feast tree, with candles blazing in every window.

Oskar was puzzled. Aunt Mitza was notoriously stingy—even at the dark of the moon she allowed only one window to be lit, but now every window had a whole line of candles blazing away on its sill, and the house shone like a beacon in the night. Suddenly, Oskar understood. The reason the house looked like a beacon was because that was exactly what it was: a beacon showing the Garmin where to come. *Aunt Mitza had planned it all*. Feeling sick with fear, Oskar raced up the track and hurtled down into a dark and particularly deep Burrow. Some thirty seconds later, he was pushing open a trapdoor and staggering out into the undercroft below Tod’s house.

Oskar snapped his light stick closed and shoved it into his pocket. He stared at the brilliant window-shaped pools of light that the candles cast onto the sand surrounding the undercroft and listened hard for any clicks. All was silent. A sudden creak in the floorboards above sent his heart pounding until he realized it was just heavy-footed Aunt Mitza moving across the room. Oskar knew he had to act quickly. Skirting the raised brick top of the icehouse, he padded soft and fast across the earthen floor of the undercroft, all the while listening, listening, *listening*. The sudden flap of a fishing net against the side of the house as the wind caught it made him stop dead—until he realized what it was and stole on.

Oskar reached the tree-trunk stilt at the front left-hand corner of the house, which was nearest to Tod's attic window. Carved into all PathFinder house stilts and continuing up the round corner posts on the sides of the houses were shallow footholds, cut so that nets could be easily hung up to dry. Oskar remembered Dan Moon scrambling up the very same stilt to hang out his nets after the day's fishing, cheerfully calling down to him and asking how he was. Oskar felt sad remembering Dan. Like Tod, he still found it hard to believe he was gone.

Silent as a cat, Oskar swung himself up onto a foothold and began to climb. Soon he was level with the first floor, where not so long ago, he had been having supper. Suddenly, in the window that faced the Far, Oskar saw the dark shape of Aunt Mitza outlined against the light, standing still and watchful, staring out into the night.

Like a lizard in the sun when a shadow passes over it, Oskar froze. He clung to the corner post, waiting for Aunt Mitza to go. But Aunt Mitza stood motionless—apart from her head, which she turned in quick, anxious movements. Soon Oskar's fingers and toes began to go numb and he knew he had to move or fall. Praying that Aunt Mitza didn't look around just then, he took a deep breath and carried on up, swinging from side to side, his bare feet finding the footholds, left . . . right . . . left . . . right, his strong hands pulling him ever upward.

Tod's house was four stories high if you counted the undercroft and the attic. By the time Oskar reached the bargeboard that ran below the reed-thatched roof, the muscles in his arms and legs were burning and his fingers were raw and bleeding from two broken nails. But Oskar felt nothing but triumph—*he had made it*.

Clinging to a net hook, his feet resting on the rim of the porthole that lit the attic stairs, Oskar considered how he was going to get across to Tod's window. It was only a short distance—no more than eight feet—but there was nothing to hold on to. Trying not to think of the drop below, Oskar put his right foot into the curve of the nearest net hook and levered himself up so he lay flat upon the thatch. Then, determined not to look down, he inched his way, crablike, along the spiky reeds and was soon within arm's length of Tod's little dormer window. But, as he leaned across to get a handhold on the windowsill, Oskar's heart leaped into his mouth. Far below, he glimpsed three white shapes flitting across a pool of window light on the ground.

Click-clicker-click.

The Garmin were here.

GARMIN

Alice TodHunter Moon was not a girl given to screaming. But it took all of Tod's nerve—plus her determination that Aunt Mitza was *never* going to hear her scream—not to yell out loud when she saw a bloody hand with broken nails clawing at her window. Tod picked up a net hook and advanced toward the window, ready to smash the hand away. She swung the hook back and was about to bring it crashing through the glass when Oskar's pale face—his mouth open in dismay as he saw the net hook swinging his way—came into view on the other side of the window.

With a deep *thud*, the net hook buried itself in the thick upright in the middle of the casement window and a shocked Oskar lost his grip and began to slide down the thatch. Tod threw open the window and in one easy, practiced movement she grabbed hold of Oskar's shirt, pulled him in and deposited him on the floor—she had landed fish bigger than Oskar Sarn many times. He lay winded, staring up at Tod in much the same manner as her last Gooper fish had done.

Tod dropped to the floor. "Oskie!" she said. "Oskie, hey, what are you doing?"

"Tod," Oskar gasped. "You—we—we've got to get out of here. The things that came for Ferdie—they're Garmin, and they've come for you. *They're here.*"

Tod went cold. She jumped up, pulled Oskar to his feet and headed toward the attic ladder, dragging Oskar with her. Oskar protested. "No, no," he whispered. "The window. *Out of the window!*" Tod did not hear. She was already on the ladder, climbing down like a monkey and beckoning urgently to Oskar to *hurry up*. Oskar had no option but to follow. He swung himself after her and as Tod stepped onto the landing below, Oskar jumped lightly from the ladder and grabbed her.

"Tod. Stop. Listen. *They're inside the house.*"

Tod went pale. From the floor below came Aunt Mitza's familiar low growl followed by a terrifying new sound for Tod—a rapid series of *click-*

click-clicker-click-click-click. Goose bumps went running over Tod and Oskar. The clicks were utterly inhuman—and frighteningly close.

But Tod still seemed not to understand. “Aunt Mitza!” she whispered. “They’ll get her.”

Oskar shook his head with a grim smile. “No, Tod. Aunt Mitza fixed this up. They’ll get *you*.”

Tod looked horrified.

A flight of open stairs led down to the kitchen. Suddenly, a bulky Aunt Mitza-shaped shadow, thrown into sharp definition by the blazing candles in the room below, moved across the bottom step.

Oskar was beginning to panic. “Tod,” he whispered, “we’ve got to get *out*.” Tod understood now. She grabbed hold of Oskar and propelled him through one of the two doors leading off the landing. As they hurried into the room, the stairs shook—Aunt Mitza was on her way. And on her heels, they both knew, were the Garmin.

The room smelled musty. It contained the big bed that Tod’s parents had once shared and a small chair strewn with Aunt Mitza’s clothes. Its flimsy door shook as Aunt Mitza crossed the landing. Tod was hurrying across to the farthest window when something happened that froze them to the spot: a heavy Aunt Mitza footstep loosened the latch and the bedroom door swung slowly open.

Tod and Oskar stared at each other in panic. Through the opening they saw Aunt Mitza’s broad back. She was facing three-quarters away from them, holding a candle and looking down the stairs. Tod—who had spent many frightening evenings sizing up her step-aunt—stared at Aunt Mitza, trying to anticipate her next move. Never before had it been so important to get it right. From the solid immovability of Aunt Mitza’s stance, Tod guessed that she was too preoccupied with the Garmin to bother about an annoying door. But Tod also knew that any movement would catch Aunt Mitza’s eye—they must tough it out, stay stone-still and hope. Tod glanced at Oskar and she could see he had come to the same conclusion.

From the shadows, Tod and Oskar heard the soft *thub-thub* of paw pads. Aunt Mitza raised her arm to hold the candle high to guide them, and it was now that Tod saw the Garmin for the first time. With some difficulty, she controlled a shiver that welled up from deep inside her. Aunt Mitza stepped back, crowded out by the huge creatures. She pointed at the ladder leading to Tod’s attic room and one of the Garmin let go a thin stream of dribble

from its mouth, as if excited by the prospect ahead. Surprisingly agile for its size, the Garmin headed up the ladder. The other two followed it, their huge, flat heads nodding with each step. Oskar clenched his fists. It made him feel sick to think that if he had been a few minutes later, right now Tod would be facing these creatures alone.

Aunt Mitza moved to the foot of the ladder and gazed upward, waiting, Oskar knew, for Tod's scream. This was their chance.

He turned to Tod and mouthed, *Let's get out of here!*

GONE

Tod slipped the catch on the bedroom window and swung it open. The salt-scented night air swept into the musty room, and Oskar looked at Tod anxiously. Surely Aunt Mitza would smell the sea?

But out on the landing, Aunt Mitza had other things to worry about. She could hear the heavy thudding of running, jumping, padding paws as the Garmin paced the room, looking for their prey, she could hear the splintering of wood as furniture was hurled to the floor and increasingly loud *click-clicker-clicks*. But she could hear no shrieks, no screams, no pleas for help. Nothing. Aunt Mitza knew enough about her step-niece to expect her to put up a fight. A worm of worry began to gnaw at her. Why was it taking so *long*?

By now Tod was out of the window, out into the rain that was coming in from the sea, out and swinging across to the fishing net that hung down the back of the house. Quickly, Oskar followed. As he scrabbled onto the net he heard the heavy *thub-thub* of the Garmin leaping down the attic steps. Then came a series of low, threatening clicks, quickly followed by Aunt Mitza's voice, sharp with panic: "She *is* up there. I *promise* you. She must be hiding in her secret cupboard. She's a devious little madam. I'll go up and get her."

As Aunt Mitza's hurried ascent of the ladder sent the window rattling, Oskar quickly clambered down after Tod, who was waiting for him below. He grabbed hold of Tod's hand and dragged her to the undercroft and trapdoor to the Burrow entrance. Tod shuddered. She hated the Burrows.

"Not down there," she whispered.

"Yes," hissed Oskar. "We have to."

Tod watched Oskar pull up the trapdoor and disappear into the dark, then she took a deep breath and followed him down the short ladder. The Burrow was as horrible as Tod had expected, but Oskar led the way in a very capable manner, and his light stick gave her some reassurance that she was not about to step on a sand snake. She followed Oskar as he headed

steadily on through the cave-cold sand, and a few minutes later they emerged at the cinder track.

The rising wind and sharp spikes of rain took their breath away as they turned to look back at Tod's house. The lights still blazed out and nothing seemed to have changed. Tod stared at her home, trying to make sense of what had just happened, but it gave her no clues.

"C'mon," said Oskar. "We're not safe here. Follow me."

Tod nodded, but did not move. Oskar grabbed her hand and pulled. "Tod," he said urgently. "Please. Come on."

"Yeah. Okay." But still Tod stood, mesmerized by her house.

And then a thin, terrified scream cut through the night. It flew out of the house, across the dark and windswept dunes, and it made the hairs on Oskar's neck stand on end.

The scream set Tod free. She and Oskar set off at a sprint, they hurtled down into the main Burrow, which was wide enough for two, and they did not stop until Oskar skidded to a halt at the tenth exit and jerked his thumb at a ladder that led upward. He shot up the ladder, pushed open the trapdoor and waited as Tod tumbled out behind him.

Oskar let the trapdoor drop with a bang and sighed with relief. He was home. Safe. He took Tod's hand and led her out from the undercroft toward the outside steps. As they emerged from the shadows, the steps shook and two big feet came into view.

"Jerra!" Oskar called out.

Oskar's big brother spun around, a surprised look on his round, sunburned face. "Hey, Osk—what're you doing here? You're meant to be at Tod's. Mum will have a fit if she knows you came back on your own." Jerra stopped, aware now that Oskar was not alone. "Who's that?" he asked.

Tod stepped forward. "Me," she said. "Hello, Jerra."

"Hey, Tod," Jerra said. Puzzled, because he knew very well that Tod was not allowed out, he asked, "What you doing here?" And then, quickly, "Oh. I mean, it's really nice to see you. Really great, but you're not usually —"

"Shut up, Jerra," Oskar interrupted. "We've got to get inside. Fast. And bar the door."

Jerra looked shocked—Oskar was usually so calm. "Okay, Oskie," he said.

Surprised at how shaky her legs suddenly felt, Tod climbed the steps and stepped uncertainly into the welcoming candlelit room. Oskar's mother was busy at the kitchen end of the room, but at the unfamiliar footstep on the threshold she turned around. Her face lit up when she saw Tod. She put down a bunch of sea kale she was chopping and, wiping her hands on her apron as she went, hurried over to Tod and enveloped her in a hug.

It was too much for Tod. To her dismay, tears welled up in her eyes. Since her father had disappeared, Tod had tried not to cry. She was afraid that if she started she might never stop.

The noisy entrance of Oskar and Jerra saved her. "Ma, we've got to bar the door," Jerra said, picking up the iron bar that hung ready on the wall.

"And the windows," said Oskar, hurrying across the room.

Rosie Sarn stared at her sons in dismay. "Oh my days," she said. "What has happened?"

LIGHT OF DAY

Tod woke slowly. It took her a while to understand why the gray light of dawn was coming into her room in the wrong place, why the howling wind was not making her window frame rattle and why the sea sounded so much quieter. A few long, drowsy minutes later, she remembered. She was in Ferdie's room—in Ferdie's bed. Warily, Tod opened her eyes and gazed around the plain, wood-shuttered room. She looked down at the floor just to check that Ferdie was not lying on the little spare trundle bed like she always used to in the happy days before Dan Moon had disappeared, when Tod had been allowed to sleep over at the Sarns'.

But there was no trundle bed and no Ferdie. Tod slumped back on the pillow and stared up at the wooden ceiling, from which hung the intricate kites that Ferdie used to sew and decorate. Something caught Tod's eye: a tiny, green felt dragon on the end of a little chain dangling on a hook just above her head. Tod reached out to stroke it. This was Ferdie's lucky mascot—she had carried it everywhere with her and kept it beside her at night. But Ferdie had had no time to grab her dragon the night she was taken by the Garmin. The thought of how horrific it must have been for Ferdie swept over Tod and mingled with her own terror of the night before. She knew she had been very lucky. Oskar had done for her what he had not been able to do for Ferdie.

As Tod listened to the sounds of the Sarn household beginning to stir, her fear ebbed away and she realized that for the first time since her father had gone, she felt safe. She drifted into a comfortable half sleep, with the sound of the wind and the rain outside, luxuriating in the feeling of being secure inside.

At breakfast Rosie Sarn took charge. The long, scrubbed table was set for seven, and Rosie, small and round with her dark curly hair worn in a thick plait, sat at the end of the table, cutting slices of bread from a long loaf

while Jonas Sarn fussed about the stove, frying the breakfast sardines. Ranged along benches on either side of the table were the Sarn family. Next to Rosie was little Torr, five years old, his dark hair sticking up on end as it always did, his bright blue eyes big with the knowledge that something exciting had happened last night that no one would tell him about. Next to him sat Oskar and next to Oskar was an empty plate that would stay that way all through breakfast—this was Ferdie’s place, which Rosie Sarn laid for every meal.

Tod sat quietly opposite Torr. Beside her Jerra—tall, lanky and brown from the sea—fiddled awkwardly with his knife. No one spoke. It felt as though there was too much to say, that once they began to talk they would not be able to stop. Rosie passed the slices of bread along the table and Jonas arrived with a pan of sizzling sardines. They ate quietly, the clink of the knives and the bubbling of the coffeepot the only sounds to break the silence. Torr gazed from one face to another, trying to figure out what had happened, impatient to know. In the middle of chewing his last sardine he said, “Tod, did Aunt Mitza go ’way?”

“Torr, please don’t talk with your mouth full,” said Rosie.

Torr swallowed his sardine. “But *did* she? Because Aunt Mitza doesn’t like us, does she, Tod? That’s why you can’t come and stay with us anymore. But now you are here.” Torr smiled. “Which is very, *very* nice.”

Tod smiled back at Torr. “Torr, you would not believe how nice it is to be here,” she said, glancing uncertainly at Rosie. Tod was unsure how much to say in front of Torr. She didn’t want to scare him. Rosie shook her head in warning.

But Torr was not to be put off. “So *did* Aunt Mitza go ’way?” he persisted, adding, “I hope she did, because she was *horrid*.” He glanced at his mother, expecting her to tell him that he must not call anyone horrid, but his mother said nothing.

The memory of the thin, high scream that Tod had heard on the dunes played back in her head—and not for the first time that morning. “I think,” she said slowly, “that maybe I ought to go and see . . . see if Aunt Mitza really has, er, gone away.”

Jonas, a man of few words, spoke for them all. “We will come with you,” he said.

OUT OF THE BOX

Aunt Mitza was gone.

Tod, Oskar, Jonas and Jerra stood in the wreckage of the room where a little more than twelve hours before, Oskar had sat eating a very awkward supper. They had searched the house and found nothing but destruction. Tod thought it looked as though the storm had swept through the inside of the house, leaving the outside oddly untouched. Except, she thought, a storm left a freshness in the air when it abated, and the smell inside the house was anything but fresh.

Oskar wrinkled his nose in disgust. "It smells revolting."

"It smells of fear," Tod said somberly. "Poor Aunt Mitza. She must have been terrified."

Oskar looked at Tod in amazement. "*Poor Aunt Mitza?* Tod, all this was Aunt Mitza's own doing. She brought those creatures here. And it was *you* who was meant to be terrified. And *you* who would have been gone this morn—" Oskar gulped. The thought of coming here and finding Tod gone was too much.

Jonas took charge. "Children, enough," he said in his soft PathFinder lilt. "We shall not think of what might have been, but of what is to be." He turned to Tod, addressing her by her formal name as the older ones always did. "Alice, you must not remain here. Our home is now your home. Is there anything you need to bring with you?"

Tod nodded. "A box. In my room."

"Oskar, go up with Alice and help her bring the box," said Jonas.

Tod was shocked when she saw her room. Its contents had been reduced to little more than matchwood. It reminded her of a wrecked ship she had once seen pounded into smithereens by the surf. She shuddered. Something had got very angry in this room. Oskar was equally dismayed. He guessed that Tod's box lay smashed on the floor along with everything else.

But Tod seemed unconcerned. She waded through the debris to the window and kicked away a pile of shredded bedclothes mixed with the

remains of a chair, exposing the bare floorboards beneath. Tod kneeled down and drew out what looked like a short pencil. She pressed the end of the “pencil” and it flipped out to become a screwdriver. Oskar smiled—it was the present he had given Tod for her twelfth birthday. Tod unscrewed a small section of floorboard, pulled the board up and reached in. She looked up at Oskar, smiling. “Still here,” she said.

It was a small, exquisite box carved from lapis lazuli. It sat neatly on Tod’s open hand, the lapis—dark blue with streaks of gold—glinting in a small beam of sunlight. Each corner of the box was protected by a tiny piece of curved silver and the edges reinforced with strips of battered darkened silver.

“It’s so *beautiful*,” said Oskar.

Tod smiled. “It is, isn’t it? It’s a family treasure. It belonged to . . . to Dad.” Tod opened the box to show a bright blue felt lining with a molded hollow in which lay a silver filigree pointer shaped like a long, thin triangle with a delicate arrow-tipped point. It had a hollow lapis dome at the flat end of the triangle, which had a thick curl of silver on its opposite side with a hole in it. Beside it was a tiny padded leather triangle with a small onyx sphere on one of its points. Tod took out the pointer and showed it to Oskar. “It’s called a **PathFinder**.”

“Just like us,” said Oskar.

“Yeah,” said Tod. “Dad gave it to me just before the Circle, because that is when his father gave it to him. He said it had been handed down to the oldest child since the days before we went to the—” Tod stopped, realizing she was about to tell Oskar a Circle secret. “Anyway,” she said hurriedly, “it fits together like this . . .” Tod picked up the onyx sphere and held its leather triangle between her finger and thumb. She placed the hollow dome of the **PathFinder** over the sphere. The filigree pointer pivoted gently, swinging back and forth, and Oskar had the impression that the dome was actually floating on the sphere.

“It’s a compass,” he said. “The most beautiful one I have ever seen.”

“But it’s not a proper compass, is it?” said Tod. “Because there are no compass points.”

Oskar frowned. “I suppose. But it does look like it is showing you the way to somewhere, all the same.”

Tod gave Oskar a lopsided smile. “Wish it would show me the way to Dad,” she said sadly.

Oskar quickly changed the subject. “Hey, look. You’ve got a really cool snake ring, too.”

Tod gently laid the **PathFinder** back in the box and picked up the ring, which was nestling in a corner. It was formed from two thick bands of gold and silver—the snakes—twisted together. The snakes’ heads met in the front of the ring and curled around each other, looking up at the wearer. “It was my mother’s,” said Tod.

“Oh,” said Oskar. He wished he hadn’t pointed out the ring now. Everything reminded Tod of the people she had lost. Oskar hadn’t thought of it before, but he suddenly realized that Tod was an orphan. “Orphan” was such a sad and lonely word, Oskar thought.

Tod was still holding the snake ring. “I’m going to wear it when it fits me,” she said.

“I think it will fit *now*,” Oskar said, hoping to cheer things up a little. “It will go on your thumb.”

“Oh,” said Tod. “I think it will.” She slipped her mother’s ring onto her right thumb and to her surprise, the silver and gold snakes sat snug and tight. It belonged, and Tod felt like she had somehow grown up. “Oskie,” she said, “I’ve made up my mind.”

“About what?” Oskar looked worried.

“Stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Stuff . . . like not waiting around for things to happen. Like making things happen ourselves. Oskie, you and I are going to look for Ferdie. We are going to find her and bring her home.”

A broad smile spread over Oskar’s face. “You bet,” he said.

PLANS

Jonas went to check his boat after the night's storm, while Tod, Oskar and Jerra set off back to the Sarn house. The storm had left behind a deep blue sky with white scudding clouds and the smell of damp sand. The sun was warm and the air felt fresh and clean. They stood on the beach, watching the wind cut across the dune grasses.

"Jerra," said Tod, "we are going to find Ferdie."

Jerra grinned. "Yes, we have really good chance, I reckon." Then he stopped and looked puzzled. "But how did you know?"

Oskar knew when his brother was up to something. "Jerra, what's going on?"

"I think I've found out where Ferdie is."

"Why didn't you *tell* us?" Oskar asked, incredulous.

"Er . . . well, it's a long story," Jerra mumbled. "I was doing my lobster pots and I fell overboard and—hey, you two, don't look at me like that!"

Oskar and Tod were staring at Jerra, shocked. It was considered shameful to fall out of one's boat.

"It wasn't so bad," Jerra protested. "I caught hold of the rope as I fell and this Trading Post girl, Annar, she was fishing nearby and she helped me get back in. So we got talking. And I told her about Ferdie—"

Oskar was cross. "You told a Trading Post *stranger* about our sister?"

"No one at sea is a stranger, Oskie. Anyway, why not? I want to find Ferdie as much as you do, you know."

"What did the girl—Annar—tell you?" asked Tod.

"She said that a ship called the *Tristan* is moored up the creek at the OutPost—you know, just along from the Trading Post. People say that it has weird, white creatures on board that only come out at night."

"Garmin!" Oskar and Tod said together.

Jerra carried on. "Annar says there have been rumors for some time that there are prisoners on the ship. A few weeks ago Annar's sister went missing and Annar sailed to the *Tristan* to see if she was there."

“Was she?” asked Tod.

Jerra shook his head. “No. But, this is the thing . . .” His voice dropped to a whisper. “One of the crew told Annar that the only girl on board was a redheaded PathFinder, a prisoner who had arrived about a month ago.”

“Ferdie!” gasped Tod. “It *must* be.”

“Yes,” said Jerra. “That’s what I think too.”

Tod was suspicious. She remembered what Dan had told them at the Circle. “Jerra, can you really believe what someone from the OutPost says?” she asked.

“I believe Annar,” Jerra said. “And Tod, we who fish for a living are different. At sea we are all brothers and sisters. It does not matter where we come from.”

Tod remembered Dan saying something similar. And as they turned off along the track that led to the Sarn house, she said, “We have to go and find that ship. We *have* to see if Ferdie is on there.”

Jerra looked a little sheepish. “Actually, it’s all fixed up. I’ve already arranged to meet Annar at Goat Rock—it’s an island near the OutPost. Annar is going to pilot me through the sandbanks.”

“And Oskar and me,” said Tod. “We’re coming too.”

Jerra smiled. “I was hoping you might say that. Actually, I was going to ask you both. The thing is, Annar can’t go back on the ship; they’ll recognize her. They have kids working there, and to older people all kids look the same. So all you need is to look like you belong and they won’t give you a second glance.”

“How do we look like we belong?” asked Oskar.

“Leave that to Annar,” Jerra replied mysteriously.

The track rounded a dune and the Sarn house came into view. In the window Oskar saw Rosie Sarn looking out anxiously. “Ma’s not going to like us going” he said.

“We’ll tell her about Ferdie first,” Jerra said. “Let me do it, okay?”

Rosie Sarn was overcome with joy at the thought that Ferdie might be found, but her happiness did not last long. When she heard that two more of her children were putting themselves in danger, Rosie put her foot down. “Jerra, Oskar, Tod—*no*. I am not losing you as well. Jonas will go.”

It seemed to Oskar that his brother had grown up overnight. “No, Mum,” Jerra said. “It’s not for Dad to do. Oskie and Tod are coming. That

is how it has to be.”

Jonas reached out and took his wife’s hand. “We must trust Jerra, dear.” Rosie sighed. She knew she had lost.

At supper, Jerra outlined his plans. Jonas was worried. “That’s all very well, Jerra,” he said, “but you know how they are at the OutPost. They throw PathFinders into prison, no questions asked. Rosie’s uncle was in one of their prisons for years. He was a wreck when he eventually got out.”

“But why, Dad?” asked Oskar.

Jonas sighed. “It goes back a long way, Oskie. You’ll hear about it next summer when you go to the Circle.” Jonas fell silent. He suddenly remembered that Dan Moon was no longer there to lead the Circle. “You must take night gloves and cloaks, and always wear your hood up. You must not forget that we Sarns, Moons and Starrs have a sheen to our skin and hair that is easy to recognize.”

“I’ll be okay,” said Tod. “I have my mother’s complexion.”

“True,” said Rosie. “But you must still be careful, Tod.”

“Anyway,” said Jerra. “We’ll be on our way home by nightfall. With Ferdie.”

This was too much for Rosie Sarn. She buried her head in her hands. “Oh, Ferdie,” she whispered. “My poor, poor Ferdie.”

MEMORIES

Later that night as Tod tried to sleep, lying in Ferdie's bed, she remembered the first time she had seen the Dragon Boat. Her mother had still been alive then, although now Tod understood that she was already very ill. Tod couldn't sleep then, either. She loved to hear the happy sound of her parents' quiet conversation downstairs—even though it was punctuated by her mother's long bouts of coughing, which had worried her. Tod hadn't wanted to disturb them, so she had gotten out of bed, padded across to the attic window, stood up on her window seat and looked out. It was a beautiful starry sky, with a full moon riding high, and Tod had gazed at it for what felt like hours. She was beginning to get cold and was about to go back to bed when she saw what at first she had thought was a huge bird. And then she had realized that she was looking at a dragon. To her joy, the dragon swooped down and flew gracefully over the house. To her amazement Tod saw that the dragon was also a boat with a beautiful golden hull. At the tiller was a boy—a big boy even older than Jerra was then. He wore green robes with purple ribbons glinting on his sleeves, and she knew at once that he was **Magykal**. Tod had been entranced.

Tod's mother, Cassi TodHunter Draa, was from a **Magykal** family in the Hot Dry Deserts of the South. Her mother used to tell stories about how she had grown up in a big, round tent under the stars, and how the Draa family were the most powerful Wizards in the land. Tod had longed to be **Magykal**; she had decided that if only she could have purple ribbons like the boy with the dragon, then she would be. She had pestered her mother and father for purple ribbons, and when they gave her some for her seventh birthday, Tod was ecstatic. And when Ferdie's seventh birthday came around a few months later, Tod gave her one of her precious purple ribbons. Ferdie had been thrilled, and they had played **Magyk** games in the dunes all that summer.

Tod held up her arm and looked sadly at the thin, faded purple ribbon she still wore around her wrist—just as Ferdie did. Drowsy with dragons

and purple ribbons, Tod fell into a deep sleep. Six hours later Oskar was shaking her awake.

“Time to go, Tod,” he said. “Time to go get Ferdie.”



PART IV

SKIMMER

It was three o'clock in the morning and four figures were making their way through the dunes in the darkness, heading for the sound of the gentle swells breaking on the beach. The tide was high but it was about to turn, and the ebb would take them quickly along the sandspit and out to sea. Jonas was going with them to help launch Jerra's boat, *Skimmer*, but Rosie had stayed home with little Torr. And when the house was silent and all were gone, Rosie felt a wave of despair wash over her—her family was disappearing so fast that it felt as though their house had sprung a leak.

Skimmer sped along, keeping close enough to the shore to see the lights from the PathFinder houses, heading for the Beacon that marked the end of the spit. The night air was cold and Tod and Oskar sat under the cuddy at the prow of the boat, wrapped in thick waterproof blankets. Oskar took the familiar tiny green felt dragon out of his pocket. "Look," he said. "I brought this. For Ferdie. For luck."

Skimmer cut swiftly through the dark water and they quickly reached the Beacon. Here, Jerra tacked the boat and headed into the deep channel between outlying sandbanks, which would take them to the open sea. In the east the sky was lightening to a milky green, and they knew that soon their boat would be all too visible. This would have spelled trouble for a traditional PathFinder boat in fishing waters so near the Trading Post and OutPost, but *Skimmer* was different. Some years ago Jerra had found her wrecked upon the beach and, with the help of his father, he had spent many happy summers repairing her. And now his boat was going to come into her own, for she was an OutPost boat with an OutPost name. Jerra had been teased about this because traditional PathFinder boats were given names of stars, but he had refused to change it. "That's what she's called and that's the way she stays. How will she know to answer to any other name?" he had said.

Jerra now set an OutPost ensign fluttering from the stern (which Rosie had stayed up all night sewing), spread a patterned rug from their kitchen onto the boat's rough wooden deck and asked Oskar to nail a strip of traditional OutPost gold braid along the edge of the cuddy. "There," he said with a grin. "Now she looks like all those other fancy-pants OutPost boats. Poor *Skimmer*."

The misty pale sun climbed higher in the sky, a brisk breeze sprang up and the ensign—dark blue with two big gold stars—fluttered importantly as *Skimmer* headed for Goat Rock—a tiny, rocky island that, if seen with half-closed eyes and a lot of imagination, was the shape of a goat's head. *Skimmer* was well named. She skimmed across the water and soon they were near enough to Goat Rock to see an elegant little boat, its sails white against the gray granite, waiting for them.

"There she is," said Jerra, waving excitedly. "There's Annar!"

Through the telescope Tod saw a dark-haired girl in a thick blue fisherman's jersey. She handed the telescope to Oskar and whispered, "She looks okay, Oskie."

Annar and her boat, *Swan*, were waiting at a small stone quay on the sheltered side of Goat Rock, but as *Skimmer* approached she sailed out to meet them. "There's a thick mist up there this morning," she told them. "Follow close or you'll lose me."

As they drew near the mouth of the creek, a white mist came in and Annar raised a red pennant to make it easier for them to follow. Soon the wind died and both boats had to be rowed the rest of the way. They tied *Skimmer* and *Swan* together to the OutPost quay wall and moments later they were on the quayside. Annar and Jerra were hugging and smiling delightedly. Oskar raised his eyebrows at Tod as if to say, *Jerra's got a girlfriend*.

"This is my brother Oskar and our best friend, Tod," said Jerra, introducing them to Annar.

"Hello, Oskar. Hello, Tod," Annar said, a little shyly.

Tod noticed that Annar was standing beneath a large board on which was a written long list, each section beginning with: "DO NOT." One in particular caught her eye: *DO NOT land here if you are an undesirable alien. Undesirable aliens include: PathFinders, Moth-Wardens and Carminators. Penalty: not less than ten years in prison.*

Across the word "PathFinder," someone had scrawled: *fish slime*.

Annar followed Tod's gaze. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's horrible. But we have to come here to get a pass for the creek."

But the Quay Office was not yet open. Annar glanced around anxiously. "Let's go somewhere quiet," she said. She led them to a line of deserted net lofts that backed onto the high wall that separated the OutPost from the woods and the creek beyond. They sat in the sunshine, watching the Quay Office and hoping that someone would soon arrive to open up.

"I've got your stuff here," Annar said. She handed Tod and Oskar two red-and-white-striped tops with *Tristan* embroidered across the back in big blue letters. "Put them on later," she said. "No one likes the *Tristan* people here."

Tod listened carefully while Annar described the layout of the *Tristan*. She did it so well that Tod could picture the ship as if she were there. Oskar, however, was having difficulty concentrating. He was ravenously hungry and longing for breakfast. Every now and then he glanced across at a hut with the words *SnakShak* scrawled across its black wooden planks. It sat in the middle of the quayside sporting a cheerful striped awning, and it was selling fresh bacon rolls. The smell of the frying bacon was driving Oskar crazy. As Annar once again ran through the layout of the hatches on the *Tristan*'s deck, Oskar's stomach let out a long growl—and before anyone could stop him, he was up and away, heading toward the SnakShak.

"Sheesh!" said Jerra, leaping to his feet. "What's he doing?"

Oskar had ducked in under the awning and was approaching the counter. Jerra looked at Annar in a panic. "He's got to get out of there."

"I'll get him," said Annar, setting off toward the SnakShak with Jerra and Tod in tow. "Nice and slow. No drawing attention to ourselves. We just act natural, okay?"

Jerra nodded and tried to walk nonchalantly. Tod followed, confused. Oskar seemed to be behaving in the most natural way of all, she thought. What was wrong with going to get a bacon roll? Tod soon found out.

Under the awning, a young seafaring couple looked up from their breakfast. They smiled at Oskar—as people who have spent time at sea do when they reach the safety of land. They both looked windswept and sunburned. The young man had friendly, bright green eyes, and a shock of tangled straw-colored hair with braids and beads woven into it. The young woman, with her white-blond hair and blue eyes, was clearly from the Land of the Long Nights; on her lap was a small orange cat to whom she was

feeding tiny fish. As Annar hurried in after Oskar, the couple smiled at her too, but Annar was too preoccupied to return their greeting. She put her arm around Oskar's shoulders and Oskar looked up irritably. He didn't think Annar knew him well enough to do that.

"Come now, Oskar," said Annar. "We must go."

"But I've just ordered four bacon rolls," Oskar said in his telltale lilting PathFinder accent.

"I'll get them," said Annar. "Go now, your brother wishes to speak to you."

Oskar frowned. "Can't it wait?"

"No," Annar said sternly.

Tod saw the cook behind the counter stare at Oskar's hand as he offered his payment of four big copper pennies. In the shadows of the awning the sheen on Oskar's skin and red hair flashed like the shine on a newly landed fish. Now Tod understood Jerra's concern.

The cook recoiled. "Put them there, *Fish Boy*," he muttered under his breath, indicating the zinc counter. But still Oskar stood waiting, taking no notice of Annar.

"I'm going to get him," muttered Tod.

As Tod joined Oskar and Annar at the counter she saw two OutPost officials wandering across to the Quay Office, their gold braid glittering in the sun and their elaborately curled white wigs bright against the black-painted sheds behind them. The SnakShak cook saw them too.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Fish slime here! Fish slime!"

Tod leaped forward and grabbed Oskar. "Run, you idiot!" she told him. With Annar on one side and Tod on the other, Oskar was propelled rapidly out of the SnakShak, protesting as he went. "Ferdie's dragon! You made me drop her dragon!"

Tod and Jerra pushed Oskar across the quay, following Annar as she dodged behind a line of net lofts. Behind them they heard the thudding of heavy footsteps. Annar dived under a tangled pile of old fishing nets, and Tod, Oskar and Jerra followed fast. In the rank, fish-smelling gloom they listened to the sound of the pursuing footsteps stop some distance away, wait a while and then walk away. None of the officials wanted to get their finery dirty.

Many long, smelly minutes later they warily crept out.

“You idiot!” Jerra hissed at his brother. “You stupid little know-it-all. You total—”

“That’s enough, Jerra,” Tod cut in. “Oskie knows it was stupid. There’s no point fighting about it.”

Oskar was distraught. “Ferdie’s dragon. Her lucky dragon!”

“Oskie,” said Tod, “you *have* to forget the dragon.”

“Now please, follow me,” Annar said.

Oskar hung back. “But the *dragon*,” he wailed.

Jerra grabbed hold of Oskar’s top and pulled him along. “Shut up, Oskar. You nearly got us all thrown in prison for *ten years*.”

Oskar looked wide-eyed at Jerra. “Why?”

“Idiot boy. Didn’t you read the sign? We’re not allowed here, *get it?*”

Suddenly a shout from behind made them all jump. “Hey!”

They spun around and to their horror saw the young seafaring man who had been at the SnakShak running toward them, closely followed by his girlfriend carrying her cat.

“Run!” said Jerra.

“No, wait,” said Tod. “Look, I think she’s got—yes, *she’s got Ferdie’s dragon!*”

Jerra hesitated. The young woman with the cat was holding out something very small and possibly green.

“Please, Jerra,” Oskar pleaded. “Please wait.”

“Let’s wait,” said Tod. “I think they’re okay.”

Jerra was not inclined to trust his brother’s judgment, but he did trust Tod’s.

The couple reached them. “You dropped this,” the young woman said, handing Ferdie’s felt dragon to Oskar with a smile.

“Oh, thank you,” said Oskar. “Thank you very, very much!”

“It is my pleasure,” she said in a singsong Northern Trader accent.

The young man was looking around warily. He lowered his voice and said, “I saw you were having trouble. There are some strangers who are not welcome here, you know.”

“We know,” Jerra said shortly.

“Look,” the young man said, a little awkwardly. “I think those two officials who saw you have gone to get reinforcements. They’re not going to give up the search. You have to get out of here.”

Oskar broke in suddenly. “But we can’t! We have to rescue my sister!”

“Oskar, shut *up*, will you?” said Jerra.

The young man remembered a time when he and his little brother had been searching for *their* sister. He remembered the desperation he had felt—the same desperation he could see now in the eyes of the kids in front of him. “So where’s your sister?” he asked gently.

Jerra kicked Oskar to tell him to be quiet. No one answered.

“You can trust me,” said the young man. “My name is Nicko. Nicko Heap. And this is my girlfriend, Snorri Snorrelssen. I know this place. I know how it works. And believe me, you are in danger.”

“Which is why we’re on our way out,” Annar said, a little snappily. She pointed to the gate set in the high wall that surrounded the OutPost. As she did so four burly officials marched through, closed the gate behind them and stood on guard.

“Not that way, you’re not,” said Nicko.

“Come with us,” said Snorri. “We have a boat. We will get you out of here.”

Jerra glanced at Annar, who nodded. “Thanks,” Jerra said. “Thanks, Snorri. Nicko.”

As they approached the quay they saw another knot of officials—in their usual array of white wigs and too much gold braid upon their jackets—staring down at the boats tied up below. They had discovered *Skimmer*. As they drew nearer, Jerra could see his beloved boat being trampled in by two heavy-footed men laughing at her hand-sewn flag and her rough disguise while they tied her—and *Swan*—to an OutPost launch.

“Hey!” Annar yelled. “Leave my boat alone!” And before anyone could stop her, Annar had darted away to argue with the officials.

Jerra had to be stopped from going after Annar. “Don’t,” said Nicko, grabbing his arm.

“You will put her in danger if you go after her,” Snorri told him sternly.

Nicko and Snorri hurried them on, heading for a large, weather-beaten red boat called *Adventurer* moored with the bigger fishing boats. In seconds they were on board and Snorri was casting off the mooring lines. As they sailed off from the quay, Jerra had to watch his beloved *Skimmer*—along with *Swan*—being towed away by the launch. But what was even worse was seeing Annar marched off to the Quay Office, her slight figure dwarfed by the prancing OutPost officials with their ridiculously tall white wigs.

From across the water came the conversation of the two sailors towing *Skimmer* and *Swan*.

“No escape for them now,” they said, laughing. “Stupid Fish Slime.”

THE LEMONADE STALL

The *Adventurer* was moored at a jetty in the creek safely past the OutPost, and Nicko was cooking breakfast. Up on deck Snorri was showing their Visitor Pass to a pair of officials who had arrived as soon as they tied up. Down in the cabin, Oskar's stomach was rumbling loudly.

Over breakfast—a deliciously heavy soup of beans and fish with crusty pieces of cheesy bread floating in it—they exchanged stories. Snorri told them how she had met Nicko in his country across the water, and how after a few years she had gone back home to the Land of the Long Nights. Nicko told them about his long voyage to find Snorri and that she was now coming back to his home—which he called the Castle—where they planned to get married. Tod thought this was very romantic indeed. Oskar thought it was a long way to travel just to find a girl, but he knew better than to say so.

Then it was the turn of the PathFinders to tell their story. Tod did the talking while Nicko and Snorri listened increasingly somberly. She explained about Ferdie, the Garmin and Aunt Mitza. And the more she explained, the worse Tod thought things sounded. By the time she had finished, Tod was feeling seriously scared. A glance at Oskar told her he felt the same.

Jerra, too, looked serious, but he was thinking about Annar. What would she think of him, watching her being taken away and doing nothing about it? And without Annar, they did not know where to find the *Tristan*.

There was a lemonade stall set up at the end of the jetty run by a big woman with a friendly smile. After breakfast, Tod and Oskar decided to ask the lemonade seller about the *Tristan*. Tod made Oskar stay in the sun while she ventured into the shadows of the awning. She handed over a couple of copper pennies and the stallholder took two thick green bottles out of a tub of ice and gave them to her.

“Excuse me,” Tod said. “We are looking for a ship. She's called the *Tristan*.”

The woman frowned. “The *Tristan*?”

“Yes. We have an, er, appointment there. I wonder if you know where —”

The lemonade seller leaned so close that Tod could smell her sweet, lemony breath. “Look, ducks, here’s advice. If you have an appointment on that ship, *don’t keep it*. Go home. Got that?” Suddenly she screamed out, “Get off, you vermin! *Get off!*”

Oskar froze. He’d been discovered—but how? He was standing in full sunlight. He turned to run but Tod grabbed him. “No,” she said. “It’s that. Look.”

A small monkey wearing a red jacket was leaping across the pile of lemons, skillfully avoiding the lemonade seller’s swipes. It picked up a lemon and then jumped into the sugar barrel, scooped up a fistful of sugar and crammed it into its mouth.

“Filthy, filthy animal!” yelled the woman. She lunged at the monkey and set the pile of lemons tumbling to the ground. The monkey screamed with laughter and ran off.

“Tod!” said Oskar. “Look. Look what the monkey’s got!”

“What?” said Tod, who was busy picking up the lemons and handing them back to the lemonade seller.

“Thank you, ducks,” said the woman. “You see, nothing but trouble comes from that ship.”

“*Tod!*” Oskar said urgently.

Tod ignored him. “So,” she asked the lemonade seller, “is that where the monkey’s from—the *Tristan*?”

“Yes, ducks. And it’s not the only filthy creature on board, either.” She leaned forward confidingly. “There are abominations on the ship. *Abominations.*” The woman rolled the word around her mouth like a sour lemon.

“Sorry,” Tod said, looking at the fallen lemons, “but we have to go now.”

Oskar was impatiently hopping around in the sun. “Did you see what was on that monkey’s arm?” he said.

“No, what?”

“It was *Ferdie’s purple ribbon.*”

“Oh, Oskie!” Tod spotted a flash of red scuttling through the stalls. “There it is! After it!”

Oskar dithered. “But what about Nicko and Snorri? They won’t know where we’ve gone.”

“There’s no time,” said Tod. “We have to follow the monkey.”

Snorri saw them go. “They are chasing a monkey,” she said to Nicko as she climbed down into the cabin. “They are a little peculiar, do you not think?”

THE MONKEY

Following the monkey was not as difficult as Tod had feared. As it scampered along the dusty path beside the creek, people leaped out of the creature's way. Tod noticed that many of them crossed their index fingers against each other and held them in front of their faces, making the seafarer's sign to ward off the Evil Eye.

Suddenly the monkey sat down and bit into the lemon. It leaped up squealing and hurled the offending fruit out into the creek.

Oskar chuckled. "Serves it right," he said.

The monkey dropped down off the path and set off along the sand uncovered by the low tide. The flash of its red jacket against the dark yellow was easy to see, and Tod and Oskar jogged along the path keeping pace with it. They had left the market behind and the creek was now bordered by a dense wood, which curved into a steep left-hand turn ahead. As they rounded the bend, Tod and Oskar no longer had any need to watch the monkey. In front of them lay a beautifully elegant ship, her paintwork shining blue and gold. Her white sails were neatly furled, her woodwork shone, her ropes were perfectly coiled and the line of windows in her broad stern—their blinds down—gleamed in the sunlight. And just below the stern rail, proud curlicues of gold proclaimed the ship's identity: *Tristan*.

Tod was shocked. "But . . . she's *beautiful*." She had been convinced that somehow the ship would show the evil that lurked within.

Oskar, too, was dismayed at his inability to read the ship. He had been convinced that as soon as he saw the *Tristan* he would feel that Ferdie was close by. But Oskar felt nothing at all. His twin could just as easily be thousands of miles away on the other side of the world.

Down in the deep cut of the creek, the monkey was scampering toward the ship. Her blue hull reared up like a cliff face and they watched the monkey run into the shadows of the ship's overhang.

"Look!" said Tod. "There's a rope ladder for the monkey!"

"We could use that to get on board," Oskar whispered.

There were some ivy-clad ruins deep in the shadows of the trees. In an old, eerily dark archway with the figure *IV* carved into it they put on their *Tristan* tops.

“This is some kind of tunnel,” whispered Tod.

Oskar peered into the depths of the archway. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Can you see a spooky white mist way down there?”

“Weird,” said Oskar with a shiver.

“Yeah,” said Tod. “Let’s go.”

THE PRISONER

Balanced at the top of the rope ladder, Oskar peered into the ship. It was just as Annar had said. The only person on deck was a sailor guarding the gangplank on the far side, and he was facing away. Oskar looked down at Tod and gave the PathFinder “okay” sign. With a movement as sinuous as if he were tracking dune rats, he pulled himself up over the gunnels and slithered silently down on the deck, which was warm and smooth to his bare feet. He crouched behind a raised hatch and waited for Tod.

Tod was up the ladder as fast as the monkey. In thirty seconds she had slipped over the gunnels and landed lightly beside Oskar. They began to crawl slowly forward, keeping hidden behind neatly stowed coils of rope, upturned boats and a stack of packing crates. Soon they reached a long, raised skylight, which concealed them from view and allowed them to head fast for the open cargo hold hatchway that Annar had described.

The cargo hatch ladder took them two decks down into hot, stuffy gloom. As they descended they smelled something nastily familiar—the damp-dog stench of Garmin. As Tod and Oskar crept warily off the ladder, they saw three large cages in the shadows. Each contained a Garmin. The creatures got to their feet, their eyes glinting yellow out of their broad, white faces, their monkeylike front paws gripping the bars. They opened their mouths to show a row of flat, white teeth and two long, tubular fangs from which thick spittle was dropping in a shining thread. One of them flicked out a long, flat, forked black tongue.

Clicker-click-click. Click-click.

“C’mon,” whispered Oskar.

Tod and Oskar dropped down the hatchway into the lowest cargo hold. There were no portholes here, and all Tod could see was the sheen of Oskar’s hair. She took a light stick from her pocket and bent it. Its soft green light showed many more cages lining the sides of the hold.

“They’re empty,” whispered Oskar, who could see much better in the dark than Tod. “And they don’t smell of Garmin.”

A horrible thought struck Tod. “You don’t think they keep *people* in these?” she whispered.

“I dunno,” Oskar said miserably. He couldn’t bear to think of Ferdie imprisoned like a dog. “Ferdie,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “*Ferdie.*”

A faint rustle of straw from somewhere in the darkness set Oskar’s heart pounding. “Ferdie?”

There was no response. “Did you hear that?” Oskar whispered to Tod.

Tod nodded. They crept slowly along the dark, silent row. At every cage they stopped, and the eerie green light from Tod’s light stick lit up no more than rough wood and straw. They headed forward toward the prow of the ship and at the very last cage, by the forward bulkhead, a voice said, “*Hish!*”

“Who’s there?” whispered Oskar.

“*Hish. Hish. Water. Water.*” The voice was harsh and parched and Oskar knew there was no way it belonged to Ferdie. Tod’s light showed a man sitting cross-legged on the straw, a thin hand gripping the bars. He stared at them, sizing them up. “Water,” he whispered.

From his backpack, Oskar took his precious bottle of lemonade and handed it to the man. The man fumbled awkwardly with the top and Oskar realized with a shock that he had only one arm. Oskar reached in and flipped the top open. The man drank greedily, gulping down the liquid while Oskar and Tod exchanged glances, both imagining Ferdie in the same condition. The man finished drinking and handed the empty bottle back to Oskar.

“I thank you. I thank you.”

“Can we help you—can we get you out?” asked Tod.

“Out?” The man’s wide eyes stared at them, shining in the dim green light. As the water and salts from the lemonade spread to his parched brain he began to think once again. And he realized that the two children in front of him were not the regular crew. And they were as desperate as he was.

“Aye, ye can. Bolt at the side. Simple mechanism. Release it and the front slides up.”

The front of the cage slid open easily and the man crawled out. He stood up slowly and painfully—he had not stretched out straight for many days. He looked at Tod and Oskar. “My heartfelt thanks to ye,” he said. “Samuel Starr, at your service.” He bowed his head.

“Are you the only one here?” asked Tod.

“In these pernicious cages, I am the only one left,” he said, running his hand along the bulkhead, searching for something. He grinned. “No use to them with but one arm.”

“Oh, Oskie,” Tod whispered miserably. “I was so sure we’d find her.”

Oskar was too desolate to speak.

Clink. Something metallic fell to the floor. Samuel swore.

“I beg your forgiveness for my foul words,” he said. “Please, I was trying to discover a key they keep hanging here on a hook. But it has fallen. Can you see it with your light?”

With the glow of her light stick, Tod found a large iron key lying on the floor. She handed it to the man, but he waved it away. “I pray you do it, for my hand is shaking still. Place it in the lock there.” He pointed a trembling finger to what Tod and Oskar could now see was a small door in the bulkhead—the entrance to the chain locker, the place deep in the prow of a ship where the anchor and its chain were normally kept. In the right-hand side of the door was the dark shape of a keyhole.

“My family were PathFinders, way back. And one of us is in there—a child. A Pathfinder child. She was here when I came. I cannot leave knowing that she is still here.”

Oskar went deathly pale. Tod handed him the key.

“Here, Oskie,” she said. “You do it.”

THE CHAIN LOCKER

Oskar's hands were shaking as he turned the key in the lock. The door swung open and a dim light lit up their faces. Oskar felt sick. He was afraid of what he would find. If it wasn't Ferdie, he couldn't bear it. And if it was Ferdie, what state would his sister be in after one long month as a prisoner in a place like this?

The heavy door—thick, riveted metal just like the bulkhead—swung silently open. Tod handed her light stick to Oskar and nudged him through the door.

Oskar stared, trying to make sense of what he saw: a lantern hanging from the ceiling showed a tiny figure—surely too small and thin for his robust sister—sitting with its back to the door, surrounded by a sea of shimmering gold. The figure's right arm was methodically moving in and out, in and out. Oskar was puzzled for a moment and then he realized that, bizarrely, the figure was *sewing*. It reminded him of a scene from the book of fairy tales that his mother used to read to them on dark winter nights, but it made no sense at all. The figure had not looked around at the opening of the door and Oskar had the feeling that this was deliberate, for something in the tense alertness of the figure told him that whoever it was knew that someone was there and was deliberately ignoring them. And that raised Oskar's hopes—that was just the kind of way Ferdie would behave.

Oskar's throat was dry as dust. He swallowed hard and managed to croak, "Ferdie?"

The figure sprang to its feet and swung around; cascades of golden cloth fell to the floor like softly billowing waves.

"Oskie?" came a whisper.

"Ferdie! Oh, *Ferdie*." Oskar leaped toward her and Ferdie looked horrified.

"No! Oskie, the cloth, mind the gold, it's—"

But Oskar didn't care; all he wanted was to grab Ferdie and take her home. He trampled across the soft gold cloth and hugged Ferdie hard. Oskar

was shocked: Ferdie felt like a bag of sticks.

Ferdie's deep, dark-shadowed eyes stared at her twin and she broke into a sob. "You've ruined it. What's going to happen to me now?"

Oskar didn't know what to say. Behind him came Tod's voice.

"You're coming home, Ferdie," she said gently. "You don't have to worry about that stuff anymore."

"But it's my Lady's ball gown," said Ferdie. "I have to finish the buttons by tonight."

"Ferdie, please—you don't have to finish *anything*," said Oskar. "Because by tonight you'll be home with Mum and Dad."

"Mum . . . Dad . . ." Ferdie tried out the words as though she could not quite remember what they meant.

Tod was becoming apprehensive. "Ferdie, we must go before someone finds us." To the accompaniment of a gasp from Ferdie, Tod now also trampled across the fine gold fabric. "Ferdie's in shock," Tod whispered to Oskar. "We'll have to just grab her and go."

Oskar nodded. He took one arm and Tod took the other, and together they tried to walk Ferdie forward.

"No! Oh, *stop!*" gasped Ferdie, as if in pain.

Oskar began to feel scared. He had dreamed of the moment he would find Ferdie so often that it had almost become reality. And in each dream, every time, she had hurtled into his arms and they had run away home together. Never, ever, had he imagined *this*. What was wrong with Ferdie? Why wouldn't she come with them?

Ferdie snatched at the shiny gold fabric and for a moment Oskar thought that his sister had gone mad and wanted to take it with her. And then, as she lifted up the fabric to reveal her feet, he understood the awful truth—Ferdie's ankle was shackled to the floor.

A hoarse voice behind them swore once more. "To do that to such a little one!" said Samuel Starr. "It is a bad thing. A bad, bad thing."

Oskar kneeled down at Ferdie's feet. A thick, tight band of steel was fixed around her left ankle and linked to a chain that was welded to a metal plate set into the floor.

"*Hish!*" came a hiss from the doorway. "*Hish, hish*. I hear someone a-coming." Samuel stepped into the chain locker and pulled the door closed behind him. He hurried over to Ferdie, took the shackle in his hand and shook it angrily. "We must shift it. We *must!*"

Oskar felt in his pocket. *Please*, he thought. *Please let it be here.*

Outside they heard the light *thub* of bare feet on boards as someone jumped off the ladder, followed by the rattle of something being dragged across the bars of the cages. In the light of the lantern, Tod saw Samuel Starr go pale. "It is feeding time," he whispered. "The turnkey will see I am not there. I—I must go. I will give myself up. It will buy you time to release your sister."

"No," whispered Ferdie. "Don't go. Please, Samuel."

Ferdie had spent many a lonely night and day listening to Samuel through the thin bulkhead walls. The rasp of his voice had traveled through the tiny grille in the door and while Ferdie sewed, she had listened to his stories, his soft sea shanties and his rambling yarns. The knowledge that not far away there was someone good had kept the worst of her fears at bay and given her hope. And now she could not bear the thought of Samuel giving himself up—to what fate she could not imagine.

So Samuel Starr stayed. And when they heard the turnkey's gasp of surprise to see his empty cage and heard the running of his feet and the rattle and rush of him ascending the ladder, they knew there was little time left.

"Escape! Escape!" They heard shouts from above and the *thub-thub-thub* of more feet.

In the last pocket he had left to try, Oskar's frantic fingers closed around his lock-picking key. He grasped the shackle around Ferdie's ankle. "It won't come off, Oskie," Ferdie said quietly. "You should go now before they catch you, too. Go back to Mum and Dad. Tell them I am okay and that somehow, one day I will come home. I will. I *promise.*"

"Just keep still, will you, Ferd?" Oskar muttered.

Above their heads they could hear the cry spreading through the ship. "Escape. Escape!" Oskar ran his fingers over the seemingly smooth fetter until he found the telltale line of the join. He ran his fingernail along the join until he came to a small dip, and this was where he pushed his lock-picker in. With two deft twists and a press downward, Oskar felt something within the fetter give and it sprang open. Ferdie gasped in amazement. She shook her foot and she was free.

Everyone stared in astonishment at the sprung shackle lying on top of the billows of gold. Then the sound of bare feet in the cargo hold beyond brought them back to reality. They were not out of danger yet.

“Did you not look in the chain locker, you fool?” demanded an angry voice.

“N-no sir. I thought it best to tell you first, like.”

“And let him hide until you’d gone and then let him creep out nice and easy, eh? Like you had planned it all cozy together? My Lady will be very interested to hear of your new friend.”

There was terror in the voice that replied, “No! No friend of mine, sir. I swear.”

“Well, let’s have a look, shall we? Let’s see if your fine feathered friend really has flown.”

The steps advanced toward the chain locker. Tod and Oskar looked at each other in panic—they were trapped. Samuel threw his weight against the door. “They won’t get in,” he growled. “Over my dead body.”

It was Ferdie who took control. “No!” she whispered. “Let them open the door. Let them come in. You all hide under the ball gown. You, too, Samuel. Now hurry, *and get underneath!*”

Oskar was back to being little brother. “Okay, Ferdie. Come on, Tod, Samuel. *Quick.*”

They held up the swathes of cloth for Samuel, who crawled underneath with some difficulty, and then Tod and Oskar dived in. Meanwhile Ferdie had seated herself on her stool and resumed sewing. When the door burst open to reveal a burly sailor in whites followed by a tall man in dark blue, Ferdie looked up calmly.

“Yes?” she said imperiously.

Underneath the folds of cloth, Oskar smiled. So this was how Ferdie had behaved—as though her prison was her palace. His heart beating so loud that he was afraid someone would hear it, Oskar listened.

“Your door is unlocked,” he heard a voice saying suspiciously.

Oskar felt scared. How was Ferdie going to explain that?

Ferdie answered calmly. “Yes,” she said. “A horrible man with one arm came in. He wanted to set me free.”

Oskar shut his eyes tight in terror. What was Ferdie doing, giving Samuel away?

“Did he indeed?” said the voice.

“Yes, he did.” Ferdie sounded disapproving. “I told him to go away. I have my Lady’s ball gown to finish.”

“Oh.” The voice sounded somewhat thrown.

Oskar smiled. He'd forgotten how clever his twin was. But now Ferdie scared him even more.

"Shall I tell you something?" he heard her say confidentially.

"Yes?" came an eager reply.

"That man was really *bad*. He came rushing in and very nearly *trod on my Lady's gown*. He didn't care one bit. He would have ruined it. I told him to shut the door and leave me alone."

"Well, well," Oskar heard the man say.

Oskar could feel his twin give a careless shrug. "Good riddance, if you ask me. Nasty man."

"You are right in your judgment, miss. He is indeed a nasty man. We will leave you to finish my Lady's gown. I apologize for interrupting you."

"Apology accepted," Ferdie said loftily.

The door closed, and beneath the stifling folds of the gown three people lay very still, listening to retreating footsteps and full of admiration for Ferdie Sarn.

A STARR

As the sound of retreating footsteps died away, Tod and Oskar crawled out from under their golden cloud. Samuel followed slowly. With a stifled groan he stood up and bowed stiffly to Ferdie. “Magnificent,” he murmured.

Ferdie grinned and returned the bow. Oskar smiled too, pleased to see that the old Ferdie was still there.

But Tod was edgy. “We’ve got to get out of here before someone else comes,” she said.

“Aye, so you do,” said Samuel. “There are loading hatches on the next deck up with ropes there you can use to climb down.”

On the upper cargo deck the *click-clicker-clicks* started up as they hurried past the cages. Everyone stared deliberately ahead, determined not to look into the yellow eyes that were watching their every step. Quickly, Tod, Oskar and Ferdie followed Samuel, who led them to a cargo door in the hull of the ship. Two large bolts secured the door at the top and a short, thick rope was tied to a handle set in its center. Under Samuel’s instruction, Tod, Oskar and Ferdie held the rope taut while Samuel shot the bolts open. The weight of the door surprised them. It dropped outward and a bright strip of light appeared. Slowly they let the door fall and as it moved down, the strip of light became a beam of brilliance that spilled into the dingy cargo hold, sending the *click-click-clicking* wild with anticipation. Ferdie squinted in the brightness. After two months living in lantern light, sunlight hurt.

The cargo door stuck out from the side of the ship like a drawbridge, but it was a drawbridge going nowhere. However, this did not worry Samuel. He took a rope and with a deft sailor’s knot he one-handedly secured it to a ring set into a beam in the ceiling and threw the other out over the side of the door.

“Go!” Samuel told them. “And when you get down, you run for it.”

Tod went first so she could hold the rope for Ferdie. In a few seconds she reached the grassy footpath, cool in the shadows of the ship. Weak from

her two months' imprisonment, Ferdie slowly climbed down, then Oskar followed quickly. They all looked up, waiting for Samuel.

Samuel leaned out from the cargo hatch and made a flapping, shooping movement with his hand. Tod realized what Samuel meant. "He's telling us to go without him," she said.

"No," Ferdie whispered. "No!"

"Ferdie, he's going to be really slow down the rope with only one hand," Tod said. "He wants us to get away. *Now.*"

Ferdie gazed miserably up at Samuel, who was standing in the cargo hatch. Samuel waved briefly and Ferdie blew him a kiss. Suddenly, Samuel was pulled back into the darkness of the ship. A shout sent them running: "My Lady, my Lady! Your sewing girl! She's out!"

Tod risked a quick glance backward and saw the Lady for the first time. A large, round woman, with a swathe of silver-and-gold cloth wound around her head and a thick rope of blue stones around her neck, was staring down at them, her blue silk robes billowing in the breeze, her red mouth open in a shout. "Get her!" she screamed. "Get her!"

Behind them they heard heavy feet pounding down the gangplank. The chase was on.

THE CHASE

Ferdie's feet hardly touched the ground as Tod and Oskar carried her between them, racing along the path that would take them back to the jetty. Behind them they heard their pursuers drawing ever closer, and as they rounded the bend, disaster struck. Their only hope of escape—Nicko and Snorri's boat—was not there.

"They've gone!" Oskar gasped in dismay. "What are we going to do now?"

One glance at the water told Tod what had happened. The *Adventurer* was anchored in the mouth of the creek—Nicko and Snorri had had to move out into deeper water in order not to be stranded by the falling tide. Oskar had slowed down in despair and Tod found that she was dragging not only Ferdie along but Oskar, too. Tod yelled at him fiercely, "Get a move on, Oskie! They're out in the creek. We can get to the jetty. There's a rowboat!"

Now Oskar understood. He picked up speed, but the long dusty path stretched out before them. The jetty seemed a million miles away and Ferdie was tiring fast.

The pounding of the pursuers' feet was drawing ever closer. Tod glanced back and wished she hadn't. Rounding the bend were four sailors in striped *Tristan* tops, their knives glittering in the sun.

"Those kids don't stand a chance," the lemonade-stall woman said to a customer.

"Oh!" said her customer. "They've got her. *They've got her!*"

"Got who, ducks?" asked the lemonade seller as her customer sprinted off. "Hey, you forgot your lemonade!"

Tod saw a familiar figure running toward them and then Jerra was there, sweeping Ferdie up into his arms as if she weighed nothing at all. "Follow me!" he yelled, and set off at a run back to the jetty. Tod and Oskar followed him down the steps and Jerra hurried them into a battered red rowboat with *Bucket* scrawled across her stern. Gently, he lifted Ferdie in,

then he and Tod pushed the *Bucket* into the water and jumped aboard. As they rowed away, their pursuers pounded onto the jetty.

Tod and Jerra pulled hard, but behind them the pursuit party had piled into a vicious-looking pointed blue boat with *TT Tristan* engraved upon the stern. They were setting off fast, and both Tod and Jerra knew that four rowers would soon easily outpace one. Meanwhile the *Bucket* was living up to her name, rocking and twisting in the turbulent waters of the outgoing tide, taking them whirling toward the *Adventurer*. And their pursuers were rapidly closing the gap.

Nicko had pulled up the anchor and Snorri was edging the *Adventurer* toward the *Bucket*. As soon as they were within range, Nicko threw a rope. Oskar caught it. He hung on tight and Nicko pulled the *Bucket* alongside the *Adventurer*. Snorri threw down a ladder and Jerra carried Ferdie up it as fast as he could.

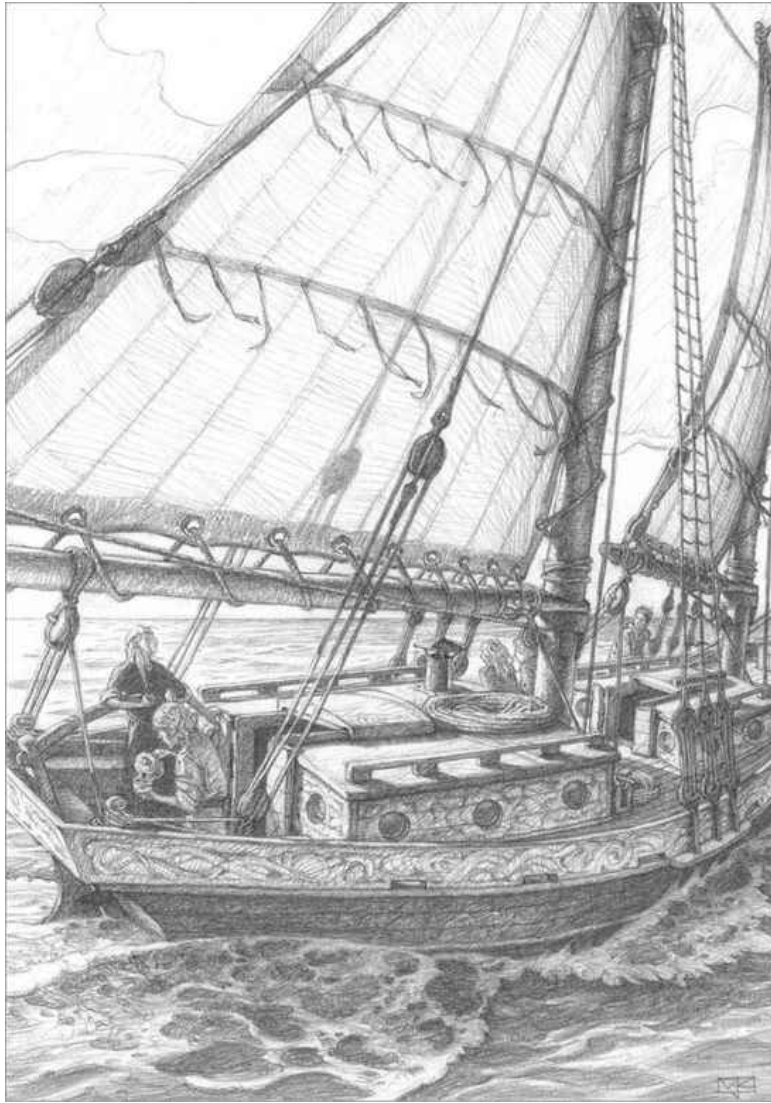
Craaack! The pursuit boat hit the *Bucket* and the little rowboat went cannoning into the side of the *Adventurer*. Undeterred, Jerra was down the ladder again. He hauled Oskar up by his jacket, then helped Tod to scramble up.

The *Bucket* did not look pretty, but she was built to last, unlike the thin pursuit boat, which, in the collision, had split from end to end. Immediately *TT Tristan* began to sink and the four pursuers found themselves ignominiously clinging to the ropes that were looped around the sides of the *Bucket*, begging for help.

Nicko loved the *Bucket* but he knew what he had to do. He cut the rope and set her free. The *Bucket* was swept into the outgoing tidal stream and as the *Adventurer* set her sails and headed out to the channel through the sandbanks at the mouth of the creek, the *Bucket* followed slowly and sadly until one of its four unwilling crew managed to climb aboard and began the long row to the shore.

Sound travels easily across water, and as the *Adventurer* left the mouth of the creek and began to carefully pick its way through the sandbanks, Ferdie heard the Lady's scream drifting down the creek.

"I want her back! Get her!"



PART V

THE ADVENTURER

As the *Adventurer* nosed into the deepwater channel that would take them out to sea, Jerra saw something he had not expected to see again—*Swan*. Annar was waiting for them. Jerra grinned. Suddenly, everything was pretty near perfect.

Annar waved and brought *Swan* skimming toward them. Soon she was sailing alongside. “Okay?” she shouted.

“Yes, yes!” Jerra called down. “We’ve got Ferdie!”

“Wow!” Annar had not really expected them to find Ferdie. She had not even expected to see Jerra again, so convinced had she been that the *Lady* would capture them all. But while they were gone, Annar had been determined to do something. “I’ve got *Skimmer* back!” she called up. “I’ll take you to her!”

Jerra laughed out loud. Everything was totally perfect now.

The *Adventurer* and her crew arranged to meet up with Jerra and *Skimmer* at Goat Rock later, and then free at last, they set sail. Ferdie sat at the prow with Tod and Oskar, savoring the sun, the salt spray and the heady sense of freedom. No one said a word. They sat with their arms around one another, luxuriating in the feeling of utter happiness and relief.

They settled down to wait at Goat Rock quay. Nicko and Snorri, with the accustomed patience of those who had been at sea for a long time, occupied themselves with fishing and letting down a lobster pot onto the seabed, but Oskar was more impatient. He borrowed the telescope and climbed Goat Rock to watch for *Skimmer*, but it was not until dusk was falling that he saw a little green boat with a white sail bringing—to his surprise—Annar as well as Jerra skimming across the waves.

“No one’s following?” Ferdie asked anxiously.

Oskar shook his head. “Nope. No one.”

It was nearly dark and the sea was choppy with the onset of the evening breezes when *Skimmer* jauntily rounded Goat Rock. The smell of cooking

—Nicko was making a fish stew—drifted appetizingly up from below, but Jerra refused all invitations to stay.

“We’ve got to get back,” he said. “I promised Mum we’d be home by nightfall.”

Oskar looked dubiously at *Skimmer*, which seemed very small after the *Adventurer*. “We won’t all fit in there,” he said.

“Of course we will,” Jerra said impatiently.

Ferdie was as hesitant as Oskar. She longed to see her parents, but the thought of five of them in *Skimmer* out on the open sea in the dark scared her. “Jerra,” she said. “It’s too dangerous. After all this I . . . I just want to get home *safely*.”

“Ferdie is right,” said Annar. “*Skimmer* will be slow and low in the water with five of us. If the wind freshens any more it could be difficult.”

Tod agreed. “The winds around the headland are always strong at this time of year,” she said. “I don’t think it would be safe.”

“It would be downright *dangerous*, if you ask me,” said Nicko. “Snorri and I will bring Tod, Oskar and Ferdie home tomorrow morning.”

“That is very kind of you, Nicko, but I promised we’d be back *tonight*,” said Jerra.

“And you will be, Jerra,” said Annar. “But Nicko is right, it is too risky for more than two people in *Skimmer* tonight. We will go now; *Skimmer* will be light and fast and you will soon be home to tell your parents that Ferdie is free.”

And so Jerra and Annar sailed away. Tod, Oskar and Ferdie watched them until no one could see the white sail anymore, then they went below to large bowls of steaming fish stew.

GOAT ROCK

In the early hours of the morning, Ferdie woke. She stared up into the darkness, wondering why the *Tristan* was rocking and pitching so much. A flash of panic ran through her. What if the ship was sinking? How would she escape, shackled as she was to the floor? Ferdie's hand found her right ankle, where the hated shackle lay, and to her amazement, *it wasn't there*. She sat up with a start—and then she remembered where she was and a flood of joy rushed through her. Too excited to sleep, Ferdie crawled out from under her blanket and, stepping gently over Tod, climbed up to the hatch, which Nicko had left open to let the air in.

Tod was suddenly awake, aware that the space next to her was empty. She glanced up and saw Ferdie's bare foot disappearing through the hatch. Very quietly, Tod tiptoed past the sleeping Oskar and followed Ferdie outside. She found her friend sitting on the cabin roof, gazing up at the beautiful dusting of stars—stars that she had not seen for more than two months. Ferdie smiled at her. “Hey, Tod,” she whispered. “Can't you sleep either?”

Tod shook her head and sat down next to Ferdie. The warmth of the late summer's night, the gentle creaking of the boat and the *swish-swash* of the swell lulled them into a contented silence. Behind them rose the comforting mound of Goat Rock, hiding them from the OutPost and its sinister creek. In front lay the wide expanse of the sea, and in the distance on the unseen horizon was home. Dreamily, Tod watched the water moving past the anchor chain, entranced by the tiny points of phosphorescence.

Ferdie could not take her eyes off the sky. “Aren't the stars beautiful?” she whispered.

Tod looked up. “They are,” she agreed.

“They were like this the night . . . the night I was taken,” Ferdie whispered, her nervous fingers playing with the little green dragon that Oskar had jubilantly returned to her.

“Oh, Ferdie, don't think about it,” said Tod.

Ferdie shook her head. “I . . . I don’t *want* to think about it, but I can’t stop. I keep seeing those horrible white heads. Hearing those clicks . . . I thought it was Oskie fooling around with one of his mechanical things. So I opened the window to see. And then . . .” Ferdie shuddered. “And then I saw them. Huge, white snake heads bobbing . . . I remember one of them jumping up toward me and then something white and . . . and slimy, falling over me, sticking to me like glue and . . . I couldn’t move. I couldn’t shout. I couldn’t even *breathe*. Everything was so tight. And so, so cold. Like being trapped in ice. Argh!” Ferdie screamed, leaping to her feet. “*What’s that?*”

Tod jumped up, heart beating fast. “What?” she gasped. “Where?”

In the cabin below, Nicko sat up fast and hit his head on the ceiling above his bunk. Snorri managed to fall *up* the ladder. Two anxious faces appeared at the hatch.

“What is it?” Nicko asked.

“There—there’s something up here,” stammered Ferdie, pointing to the prow. “An *animal*.”

“Ullr.” Snorri sounded relieved. “Come, Ullr, come and say hello.” The black shape of a panther stood gracefully and padded silently across the deck to Snorri. She patted the panther. “Ullr keeps watch for us at night,” she said.

Both Tod and Ferdie looked puzzled—where had the panther come from?

“Your cat is called Ullr too,” Tod said.

Snorri smiled. “This *is* my cat,” she said. “Ullr is a **Transformer**. At night he becomes a panther. In the day he is my little orange cat.”

Ferdie’s shout had unsettled Nicko. After Snorri, Tod and Ferdie had gone below, Nicko climbed to the top of Goat Rock and for the rest of the night he kept watch, leaving Ullr to guard the boat. He stared out to sea but all was quiet, just the gentle *splish-splash* of waves slopping up against rock. On the horizon, where Nicko supposed the PathFinder Village to be, he could see a red glow like the first rays of the rising sun—but surely it was too early for sunrise? Nicko frowned. He had an uneasy feeling that something was wrong.

LETTERS

The morning dawned clear and bright. Quietly and efficiently, Nicko and Snorri weighed the anchor, raised the sails and were soon away with the rising sun behind them.

With Snorri at the helm, Nicko brought his **FlickFyre** stove up to the cockpit. Although Nicko came from an ancient Wizarding family, he found **Magyk** somewhat boring. He could manage a few simple spells if he needed to, but he was a practical person and preferred to work things out for himself. The **FlickFyre** stove was one of the few **Magykal** gifts Nicko had accepted for his voyage, and he had only done so on the grounds of safety. The stove used a flame contained within a **Magykal** field, which did not allow any sparks to escape and burned steadily whatever the strength of the wind. Ten minutes later Tod, Oskar and Ferdie were up on deck drinking Nicko's hot chocolate.

While Oskar and Ferdie talked excitedly about how happy their parents would be to see them home and how amazing it was that Ferdie had actually escaped, Tod sat quietly in the prow of the boat, stroking Ullr, who had now **Transformed** back into the small orange cat that Tod had first met. Tod watched the flat horizon growing more distinct as the *Adventurer* swished through the waves, taking her ever closer to home. Except, thought Tod, it didn't feel like home anymore. What was there left for her back at the village? Nothing more than an empty, wrecked house. And although Tod loved the Sarns and knew that they would insist she live with them, she felt she would always be a stranger. Their history was not hers. And Rosie and Jonas, however lovely they were, could never be her mother and father.

It was then that Tod realized that she had given up any hope that Dan would come back. She stared down into the fast-running water breaking from the prow and watched her silent tears drop into the salt water below.

Two hours later, as the *Adventurer* sailed past the Beacon, her crew saw columns of smoke rising above the dunes. As they drew closer they smelled the acrid scent of burning. Silently, they passed the telescope from one to another and saw to their horror the charred remains of PathFinder houses, black against the clear blue of the sky.

Snorri came in as close to the shore as she could, turned the *Adventurer* into the wind so that the boat slowed to a halt and Tod threw out the anchor. The *Adventurer* swung around on the chain so the prow was facing the shore.

Minutes later, they saw a flash of white sail and the green prow of *Skimmer* as she cut through the water, heading toward them. As Jerra drew near, his drawn expression and the soot on his clothes and face told them all they needed to know. Wearily, he took *Skimmer* alongside, let the sail down and threw a rope to Tod. Willing hands helped him aboard and he collapsed onto the deck. Snorri offered him some clear liquid that smelled of dead leaves. Jerra drank a little, spluttered at the taste and sat up.

“Fire,” he said. “Almost everything burned to the ground.”

“But . . . but how?” whispered Ferdie.

“Garmin—a whole pack,” said Jerra. “They came last night and set fire to the village.”

Nicko shook his head. “*Garmin*? How can Garmin use fire?”

“There were men with them,” Jerra said. “They had some kind of liquid they threw onto the stilts, then they set fire to it with what old Morris-next-door called Fire Sticks and the flames just shot up into the air—twenty, thirty feet high. No one in the attics had a chance.”

“Was anyone in *our* attic?” Ferdie asked quietly.

“It’s all right, Ferdie, no one was in the attic. Mum, Dad and Torr all got away, old Morris said. By the time Annar and I pulled *Skimmer* up the beach, most of the houses were on fire. We helped put out as many as we could but it was too late. By then they were just charred stumps.”

Tod shook her head. “Why? *Why* did they do this?”

“Revenge,” said Oskar.

As soon as he said it, Ferdie knew Oskar was right. By escaping from the Lady it was she, Ferdie, who had caused this terrible destruction.

The *Adventurer* rocked quietly on the gentle swell and the morning sun sent sparkles dancing on the top of the waves. It was—despite the destruction on shore—a beautiful day. A gust blew from the west and

slowly the *Adventurer* swung around on her anchor chain so that she was facing into the wind—and toward the Castle. Nicko felt a stirring of restlessness. He wanted to set sail right now and take Snorri home.

His hands sooty and shaking, Jerra fished two crumpled folds of paper out of his pocket. “I found these,” he said. “Mum and Dad stuffed them into the old lead pipe at the bottom of the steps.” Jerra flattened one out on his knee and handed it to Oskar and Ferdie. It was their mother’s writing. Even without reading the words, the hasty pencil scrawl and the sooty smudges told a story.

Darling Jerra, Oskie, Ferdie,

In great haste. May you all be safe and with Ferdie. Garmin have come with men and fire. Do not worry, we are all right. A wise woman has come to show us a place where we can be safe for now. We will come back soon.

Love, Mum xxx

Ferdie shook her head in despair. She could not believe she had come so close to being reunited with her parents, only for them to be snatched away at the last moment.

“I want to be with them,” Ferdie said with a sob. “I just want us to be *together* again. As a family.”

Tod listened sadly. When Ferdie spoke of family, it made her feel even more alone.

Jerra held out the other sooty piece of paper. “It’s for you,” he told Tod. Tod unfolded it and read the words with a growing feeling of wonder.

Darling Tod,

Your mother used to speak of a tower with a golden roof somewhere across the water. She wanted you to go there. This was very important to her, but I don’t know why. Dan was going to tell you on your fourteenth birthday. So I tell you now, just in case . . .

Love, Rosie x

Tod was sitting so still, so silent, that Oskar was worried. “Tod, what is it?” he asked.

Tod read the letter out loud and Nicko and Snorri exchanged glances.

“Wow,” Oskar said. “I wonder where that is?”

Tod shook her head unhappily. “I don’t know,” she said. “And there’s no one I can ask now.”

“It’s the Wizard Tower,” said Nicko.

Tod stared at him, amazed. “How do you know?”

“It must be,” Nicko said. “It all fits. It’s across the water and it’s got a golden pyramid on the top. Like a roof.”

“Have you been there?” Tod asked.

Nicko grinned. “Yes. It’s where my dad works. And some of my brothers.”

“Nicko has a lot of those,” Snorri said with a wry smile.

“Yeah.” Nicko said. “I lose count sometimes.”

Snorri looked at Tod quizzically. She saw a thin, dark-haired girl twisting her elflock in her fingers, staring stonily at the smoking ruins of her village. Snorri knew that sometimes you had to leave the place where you grew up. She put her hand on Tod’s and said, “The Wizard Tower is in the Castle, Tod. The Castle is a fine place, full of good people. This is where Nicko and I are going.”

Tod twisted her gold-and-silver snake ring. She thought of her mother’s wish for her. She thought of the house now wrecked by Garmin and the emptiness that awaited her on the shore. And Tod realized that, for the first time since her father had disappeared, she felt something good—a flicker of hope. She turned away from the devastation of her village and said to Snorri, “Take me with you. Please?”

GOOD-BYE

Arms around each other, Oskar and Ferdie stood among the charred remains of their house. Nothing was left but four blackened stilts, the tangled metal reinforcements of the ladder and the old message pipe half-buried in the ground. They watched Jerra poking about, picking out a few objects that had escaped the fire. He laid them on the flat stone and surveyed them gloomily. “Three forks, Dad’s old penknife and a couple of fish-gutters. Not much to show for the Sarn household, is it?” Jerra kicked the ground angrily and an acrid cloud of ash rose into the air, sending them all coughing. Then he saw Ferdie’s face, desolate and drawn—this was not the homecoming he had wanted for his little sister. He forced himself out of his anger.

“But we’ll show them, won’t we, Ferdie? We’ll build the house just how it was before. And Mum, Dad and Torr will be back soon and we’ll all be fine. Hey, Annar!”

Annar arrived, breathless. Jerra put his arm around her. “Annar and I want to build a house here too. Down by the marsh so that Annar can see the Trading Post lights at night.”

“Build a house? *Together?*” Oskar and Ferdie looked amazed.

“Yes. We are very happy together,” Annar said.

“Yes,” said Jerra. “We are.”

Ferdie and Oskar looked at each other—suddenly the Sarn family felt different. Oskar wasn’t sure if he liked the difference, but Ferdie hugged Jerra, then more shyly, Annar. “That’s lovely,” she said. “I can’t wait for Mum and Dad and Torr to come back. They’ll be so excited.”

“Thank you, Ferdie,” Annar said with a bashful smile. “But I came to tell you, there is a meeting. There is a house with green shutters at the far end of a track. They missed that one. People are going there now.”

“That’s Tod’s house!” exclaimed Oskar. “Oh, Jerra, do you think she’d stay if she knew her house was okay?”

Jerra shook his head. “I don’t think so, Oskie. There are bad memories here for Tod. She wants a new start.”

“But Tod loves her house. And now that Aunt Mitza is gone it belongs to her. Oh, please, Jerra, *please* can we go and tell her? *Please?* Before it’s too late!”

Jerra hated seeing his little brother so upset. “We can go if you really want, Oskie,” he said. “But I don’t think it will make any difference.”

“Please, Jerra,” Ferdie said quietly. “I miss Tod already.”

Leaving Annar to go on to the meeting, Jerra headed off to the beach with his brother and sister. But as they reached the top of the dunes and looked out to sea they saw the *Adventurer’s* sails filling with the freshening wind.

“The tide has turned,” said Jerra. “They’re going.”

Landsman that he was, Oskar did not understand. He raced down the dune, shouting to Jerra, “Hurry, Jerra! We’ve got to catch them! Hurry, hurry!”

Jerra and Ferdie caught up with him. “The *Adventurer’s* caught the wind and the tide together,” Jerra said. “She sails fast. There’s no way *Skimmer* could catch her. It’s impossible, Oskie. I’m so sorry . . .”

Oskar was suddenly overwhelmed at the thought he might never see Tod again. He raced back up to the top of the dune, and frantically waving both arms he yelled, “Tod! Wait! Don’t go. Please don’t go! Tod, Tod!”

From the *Adventurer* Tod saw Oskar waving at the top of the dune. She waved back.

“Bye, Oskie,” she whispered. “Good-bye.”



PART VI

TO THE CASTLE

Tod woke early the next morning and, hearing Nicko still snoring in his cabin, tiptoed up the ladder and padded onto the deck. She stopped and took a deep breath—it was beautiful.

It was just before dawn and through the dim twilight, Tod saw a thin layer of mist hanging over a green river, enfolding the *Adventurer* in a soft blanket of silence. She stood for some minutes, listening to the *peep-peep* of river birds and the soft *slip-slop* of wavelets caused by the dive of a duck. After the restlessness of the sea, Tod was entranced by the stillness of a river. As her eyes became accustomed to the dimness, Tod saw that Snorri and Ullr were already on deck, sitting quietly at the prow. She went forward and sat down beside Snorri and her panther, sleek and black in the darkness—apart from a bright orange tip to its tail.

Snorri looked up and smiled a welcome. “It is a beautiful morning, Tod,” she whispered.

Tod smiled. It was beautiful, even though all she could see was the mist surrounding them and the tops of trees poking out of it. But as she settled down next to Snorri, Tod saw a small gap between the mist and the water, which sat green and still. Everything felt so mysterious—just how it should be when you were on your way to a **Magykal** tower with a golden pyramid for a roof. A sudden *plip* of a fish breaking the surface made Tod laugh. “It’s so different,” she said. “I’ve never seen a river like this.”

Between Snorri and Tod lay Ullr: peaceful but watchful, as if waiting for something to happen. Tentatively, Tod rested her hand on Ullr’s back, feeling the strong muscles below the warm, smooth fur. She found it hard to believe that such a powerful beast was also Snorri’s daytime scraggy orange cat.

The mist was slowly clearing now and Tod could see the sky—a pale greenish yellow—and as she gazed toward a low, flat land Nicko had called the Marram Marshes, the first glow of the sun broke above the horizon and

Tod felt a shudder pass through the panther. She snatched her hand away in surprise.

“Do not be concerned,” Snorri murmured, stroking Ullr’s head. “Ullr is about to **Transform.**”

Tod watched the orange tip to the panther’s tail begin to spread, changing Ullr’s fur from black to a brindled orange. With the tide of color, Ullr began to change shape, shrinking before Tod’s eyes so that in no more than a few moments the creature sitting beside her was once more a small orange cat with a black-tipped tail.

Snorri patted Ullr. “Good morning, little cat,” she said.

Tod shook her head in amazement. This was the first **Magykal** creature she had ever been close to. Dimly remembered tales told to her by her mother began to come back to Tod—stories of **Magykal Transformations** that Dan had laughed about, but Tod had always believed, however strange they had seemed.

An hour later, after a breakfast of eggs and bacon, the wind freshened and the *Adventurer* set off up the river once more. Tod sat in the prow, leaning against the bowsprit, watching the green water rushing past. The mist had disappeared in the early morning sunshine and Tod gazed dreamily as the scenery sped by. On the right was farmland with meandering tracks, wide green fields and orchards dotted with round, woolly grazing sheep. It was quiet, but occasionally Tod glimpsed a farmer going about his work or saw smoke emerging from a chimney of an isolated farmhouse.

On the left of the river a much less welcoming scene presented itself. Ranks of trees crowded the bank, dark and tall and so thickly set together that Tod could see no farther than a few yards in. Every now and then the distant howl of a creature drifted across the water and set the hair on the back of her neck prickling. But sitting on the *Adventurer*, Tod felt happily secure. There would be no more lonely, fearful evenings with Aunt Mitza, and although she still had a sad pit of emptiness when she thought of her father, she no longer felt that she was falling headlong into it.

The hours wore on, and as the sun rose higher in the sky a feeling of nervousness began to creep up on Tod. They were sailing ever deeper into a new country and she could not help but wonder what awaited her in the Castle. What were the people like? Where would she live? And *how* would she live? Nicko had told her not to worry, that he and Snorri would make

sure she was okay, but it began to dawn on Tod that she had only met Nicko and Snorri two days ago. She hardly knew them.

By the time the *Adventurer* rounded the last bend and a tall, forbidding escarpment of rock reared up on their left, Tod had some very large and energetic butterflies in her stomach. But when the *Adventurer* cleared the rock and Tod saw a huge Castle, bright in the sunlight, spread out before her, the butterflies vanished. Sitting on the bowsprit, her feet dangling over the water, Tod watched, spellbound, as the detail of the Castle began to unfold before her—the ancient walls surrounding it, with houses clustered along them, colorful and bright in the afternoon sun. As they drew closer Tod saw a long, low crenelated building of mellow old stone, which Nicko said was the Palace. Its lawns stretched down to the water, where a landing stage sported red-and-white-striped poles with gilded tops. And there, walking across the grass, Tod saw a young woman in red wandering down toward the river. On her head was a circlet of gold that flashed bright in the sun.

“Hey—Jen!” Nicko yelled.

The young woman stopped dead. She stared as if in disbelief, then she let out a piercing shriek and broke into a run, hurtling down to the landing stage, waving and yelling, “Nicko! Nicko!”

“My sister, Jenna,” Nicko said to Tod with a smile. “Very undignified behavior for a Queen, if you ask me.”

Tod nearly fell off the bowsprit. “A *Queen*? So you’re a prince?”

Nicko laughed. “Oh, I must tell Jen that. No, I’m not a prince. It’s not like that.”

“Hey, Nik!” yelled the Queen, running along the landing stage, her red-and-gold cloak flying out behind her. “Tie up here, Nik!”

Nicko looked at Snorri. “Okay?” he asked.

Snorri grinned. “Okay!”

“Hey-ho,” Nicko said, pushing the tiller across. “Around we go.”

Tod leaped onto the deck to help Snorri with the sails and the *Adventurer* swung in gently toward the landing stage, the sails flapping as they lost the wind. Snorri threw the ropes to the Queen, who caught them easily and tied them around the gilded poles, pulling the *Adventurer* alongside the landing stage as she did so.

Snorri put down the landing ladder and to Tod’s amazement, the Queen hitched up her long red silk tunic—revealing a pair of very sensible brown

leather boots—clambered aboard and threw her arms around Nicko. “Nik, oh, Nicko, you’re back safe after all this time. We thought you were gone forever. Oh, I can’t wait to tell Mum! Oh, *Nicko!*”

Suddenly, something caught Tod’s eye—something very big, green and shiny was moving behind a tall hedge on the far edge of the Palace lawns. Tod heard frantic shouting and a young man wearing a leather jerkin came running through a gap in the hedge, dragging a fat hosepipe toward the river. Behind the hedge, flames were rising.

“Oh,” Snorri said. “It is that wretched dragon. I hope he is not coming near the boat.”

“Spit Fyre!” the Queen gasped. “He’s set light to the Dragon Kennel. *Again.* ’S’cuse me”—she flashed an apologetic smile at Tod—“gotta go!” The Queen leaped from the boat and raced toward the flames, but the young man—who Tod rightly took to be the dragon’s keeper—stepped into her path to stop her.

“Barney, let me pass!” Tod heard the Queen shout.

The young keeper stepped aside and Tod saw the most magnificent dragon, the sun shining on his smooth green scales, his head held high, his huge, leathery wings slowly moving up and down, rising up into the clear blue sky.

“Come down, Spit Fyre, you bad dragon!” the Queen yelled, jumping up and down. “Come down *right now!*”

Tod saw the dragon tilt his head to one side, as if considering the matter. Then he opened his mouth and a great stream of flame came roaring out, dancing up into the sky. To Tod’s excitement, the dragon swooped down low across the Palace lawns and headed straight toward the *Adventurer*.

“No!” yelled Snorri. All on board threw themselves onto the deck but at the last minute, the dragon curved upward, his pale green tummy no more than a few inches above the top of the mast. And then he was gone, flying out across the river, leaving behind a strong smell of under-wing dragon sweat.

“Come back!” the Queen yelled. “Spit Fyre, come back, you stupid dragon!”

But Barney Pot, the dragon keeper, knew his charge was not coming back. “Queen Jenna,” he said, “it is seven years now since Spit Fyre grew his adult spurs. He has gone to find a mate.”

Jenna sighed. "I know, Barney. You did warn me. But we'll miss Spit Fyre so much."

"Aye, that we will," said Barney. He threw the end of the fire hose into the river and then raced away to start turning the pump, leaving the Queen gazing sadly up at the sky.

On board the *Adventurer*, they picked themselves up off the deck and Nicko chuckled. "Welcome to the Castle, Tod," he said.

THE PALACE

Tod spent the rest of the day at the Palace, meeting more new people in one afternoon than she had ever met in her life. By the evening, when Nicko's family were gathered together in a large room overlooking the lawns that swept down to the river, Tod's head was spinning. It seemed to her that Nicko had a very large family indeed, and he had introduced her to every one of them. "Except my little brother, who can't get away from work," he explained. "You'll meet him tomorrow when we go to the Wizard Tower." Nicko smiled. "I've booked you in for a tour."

They had a noisy, happy supper at a long, narrow table. At either end were Nicko's mother and father, both with curly straw-colored hair, just like Nicko's—except a little faded with age. Sarah and Silas Heap were surprisingly scruffy for parents of a Queen, Tod thought. But everything in the Castle seemed a little odd to Tod—surely as the Queen's parents were still living, *they* should be the King and Queen of the Castle?

At supper, Tod sat next to Sarah Heap. Sarah was ecstatic at having her second-youngest son home after four long, uncertain years and she was very talkative. "You see, Alice," said Sarah—who thought Tod was a very strange name for a girl—"my seven are lovely boys, but boys will be boys. I hardly ever have them all here, safe with me. And for the first ten years I thought my youngest was *dead*—yes, it was shocking, Alice, shocking, poor little Septimus—and then just as I found him, my eldest, Simon, went a little bit wild. You know, like they do at that age sometimes. And by then my other four were living in the Forest with some *very* disreputable witches. It was not ideal, I can tell you. And then Nicko got trapped in another Time and I thought I'd never see him again. But he came back eventually, thank goodness."

Tod stared at Sarah in amazement, her spoon suspended in midair. She was rendered speechless, which was fortunate, because Sarah Heap still had a lot to say.

“For a while, Alice, all my boys were doing really well. The twins, Edd and Erik, they were Apprentices at the Wizard Tower. Simon had married a lovely girl, Lucy; Nicko worked at the boatyard; my fourth son, Jo-Jo . . .” Tod saw a flicker of disapproval cross Sarah’s face. “Well, Jo-Jo got himself a job at a very interesting shop here, and my second-oldest, Sam, decided to go out to the Marram Marshes and help young Marwick out there. And of course my youngest, Septimus, he’s always done *very* well; we’re very proud of him indeed. But nothing lasts, does it? Nicko decided to go over the seas and find his old girlfriend, Snorri—who is a lovely girl, Alice—but he was gone for *four whole years*. Can you imagine? We thought he was never coming home. And then to top it all off, Sam and Marwick disappeared. Gone. *Gone*. And now poor little William. I still can’t believe it . . . I was such a proud Grandma . . . oh dear.” Sarah got out a large white handkerchief and blew her nose loudly. “So sad . . .” To Tod’s relief, the flow was stopped by the Queen passing Sarah a bowl of something stodgy floating in custard.

“Mum! Look, here’s your favorite pudding.”

While Sarah protested that she couldn’t eat a thing and passed the bowl down to Silas, the Queen turned politely to Tod. “So, Tod, what would you like to do now you have come to the Castle?”

Tod’s head was spinning and for a moment she had no idea why she was at the Castle at all. And then she remembered Rosie Sarn’s note. “Well . . . my mother wanted me to come to the Wizard Tower.”

“Well, that doesn’t surprise me. Your mother must realize you have some **Magyk** about you,” the Queen said.

“Really?” Tod said, pleased.

“Yes. You really do have that **Magyk** something. And I should know—I grew up with whole *ton* of **Magykal** brothers, and I can tell.” The Queen shook her head and looked puzzled. “It’s a strange thing. It’s not just the green eyes, it’s something else too. I don’t have it, of course.”

“But I don’t have green eyes!” Tod said, dismayed.

Queen Jenna peered at Tod in the candlelight. “So you don’t. But that doesn’t matter.”

Tod was confused. “But I thought you said you had to have green eyes.”

“Not right at the beginning,” the Queen explained. “If you have that **Magykal** thing—whatever it is—then your eyes will begin to turn green

when you are exposed to **Magyk**. And I don't suppose you had any where you come from, did you?"

Tod smiled. "No," she said. "We only had the sea. And fish. *Lots* of fish."

"There you are, then," said the Queen. "Fish aren't at all **Magykal**, from what I've heard." She smiled. "I'm sure your mother is right. Mothers generally are."

Tod was not used to talking about her mother. "Are they?" she asked.

The Queen gave Sarah an amused glance. "Well, usually," she said. "So, Tod, you must let your mother know you have arrived safely."

"My mother's dead," Tod blurted out.

The Queen looked shocked. "Oh!" she said.

"I'm sorry," Tod said. "I didn't mean to . . ." Her voice trailed away. She realized she had never spoken those words before.

"I do understand," said the Queen, leaning across the table confidentially. "My mother is dead too. She was killed when I was only a day old."

"Oh!" said Tod. "Oh, that's awful."

"It is," said the Queen. "Well, it is for her. But I was lucky. I found another mother." She nodded toward Sarah Heap, who was now sipping some herbal tea. "And another father—even though I found out later I still had my first one. And of course I got a whole *bunch* of brothers." She looked at Nicko, who was flapping his hands like seal flippers and making barking noises. "And very noisy, silly brothers they are, too."

Nicko's seal impression was being directed at a young man who was sitting next to the Queen. He had earlier been introduced to Tod as the Chief Hermetic Scribe. Tod had no idea what a Chief Hermetic Scribe might be, but she thought the young man looked really nice. He had dark floppy hair, which every now and then he pushed back from his eyes. He was wearing a long, deep-blue jacket with gold cuffs, which Tod thought suited him very well. He had spoken to Tod a few times—asking her where she had come from and how she knew Nicko, but Tod had felt shy and had only managed one-word answers. But the Queen had no such trouble. She took the young man's hand and said, "Beetle."

Tod was surprised; she couldn't see a beetle anywhere.

The young man obviously didn't care about a stray beetle. He gave the Queen the kind of smile that Tod had seen Jerra give Annar. It made Tod

feel strangely lonely.

“Beetle,” said the Queen again. Tod stared at young man, trying to spot the beetle but with no luck. “Why don’t we show Tod the Wizard Tower after supper? It’s a beautiful evening.” She turned to Tod. “The Wizard Tower looks wonderful at night. You’ll be amazed.”

“Thank you,” said Tod. “I would love to see it.” She twisted the gold-and-silver snake ring on her thumb. *I’m going to the Wizard Tower, she silently told her mother. Just like you wanted me to.*

THE WIZARD TOWER

No one ever forgets their first sight of the Wizard Tower at night, and Tod was no exception. As she walked out of the Palace Gate and looked along Wizard Way, the wide, torchlit avenue that led to it, Tod gasped in wonder. The Wizard Tower rose high into the clear night sky, eclipsing the stars. It was tall and elegant, shimmering with a silver sheen over which played a myriad of colored lights—fleeting blue, purple, green and pink. The golden pyramid had become a pyramid of many colors reflecting the lights that glanced off it, seeming to be almost transparent at times.

Tod walked up Wizard Way, flanked by Nicko, Snorri, the Queen and the Chief Hermetic Scribe, whom, she now realized, was actually called Beetle—although she found it hard to believe that this was his real name. Why would anyone name a baby after an insect? But Tod reminded herself she was in another country. For all she knew, lots of people in the Castle were named after insects. Maybe there were Millipedes, Bugs and Bees wandering around all over the place.

The nearer Tod got to the Wizard Tower, the more unreal everything felt. Only a few days ago, with her mother and father both gone from her life forever, she had been marooned in her house with a woman who hated her. Now she had a new life, new friends and a very precious message from her mother—and every step she took was bringing her closer to the place her mother had wanted her to go.

The party progressed slowly up the middle of Wizard Way—a beautiful broad avenue lined with silver torch posts, tall as trees. The torches were lit and the flames burned high and steady in the still night air, sending shifting shadows across the smooth limestone paving. On either side of Wizard Way was an interesting mixture of small shops—mainly to do with **Magyk**—all shuttered for the night.

Tod was silent, content to be surrounded by the easy talk of her four companions. Even though they were so much older than her, their happy, joking friendliness made her feel part of the group. Their easy chatter

reminded her of the Sarn family, and suddenly Tod missed Oskar and Ferdie terribly. How much she would love them to be with her right now, for them to be walking with her toward this **Magykal** place.

They were approaching a magnificent silver gateway—the Great Arch, which led into the Wizard Tower courtyard—when they stopped outside one of the shops. Written on its signboard were the words: *Number Thirteen: Magykal Manuscriptorium and Spell-Checkers Incorporated*. The window was brightly lit with lanterns and stacked with neat piles of papers and books. It seemed that this was where Beetle lived, for he was putting a large key into the lock of the shop door.

“I’m off,” Beetle told everyone. “It’s an early start tomorrow. I’ve got to sort out a Gula-Gula.”

Nicko laughed. “You’re kidding me!” he said.

Beetle looked rueful. “I wish,” he replied. “But unfortunately there’s one taken up residence over there.” He pointed across the Way to a shop on the other side: *Bott’s Wizard Cloaks: New and Pre-Loved*. “I promised Miranda Bott I’d fix it for her.”

“Isn’t that a job for the Wizard Tower?” asked Nicko. “They’ve got safe places to put creatures like that.”

“Miranda won’t let them in,” Beetle explained. “She’s a bit against Wizards in general, you know, ever since her uncle Bertie got eaten by that **Darke** Dragon.”

Tod listened, amazed. So much seemed to happen in the Castle.

“That wasn’t their fault,” Nicko said.

“Try telling Miranda that,” said Beetle, who clearly had. “So I have to get the wretched Gula out myself and take it to the Stranger Chamber in the Wizard Tower.”

“Rather you than me,” said Nicko.

“Yeah,” Beetle said ruefully. He turned to Tod and shook her hand. “It’s been very nice meeting you,” he said, smiling. “Welcome to the Castle. May your stay be a happy one.” Tod watched Beetle hug Snorri and Nicko good-bye, give the Queen a kiss and then he was gone, the door to the strange little shop closing behind him with an exuberant *ping*.

The four now headed into the Great Arch. As they walked between the two burning torches on either side and stepped into the shadows, Tod was amazed to see that the inside of the arch was lined with the same brilliant blue stone shot through with gold that her precious box was made of. The

huge amount of the **Magykal** stone, glittering in the light of the torches, amazed Tod.

“Lapis lazuli,” the Queen told her. “It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

Tod nodded, lost for words. Her hand closed around her precious lapis lazuli box safe in the deep, buttoned pocket of Dan’s fishing vest. She thought of the strange **PathFinder** with its lapis dome that nestled inside it and she knew she had a connection with the place she had come to. If only her parents were here to ask, Tod thought, they could have told her as much. But whatever they knew was lost now. She must find it out for herself.

The Queen was chattering on like a tour guide. “There’s a lot of lapis here,” she was saying. “It’s one of the things that makes the Castle special. Ooh, look, doesn’t the tower look fabulous tonight!”

Tod stepped into the Wizard Tower courtyard and stopped dead. The sight of the Wizard Tower suddenly so close made her feel dizzy. Twenty-one stories high, it reared up into the night sky, alive with silently flashing, popping, prancing, dancing lights of every color. The tower’s hundreds of tiny windows glowed purple and Tod had a vivid impression of many lives being lived behind the windows. Feeling as though she were wading through water, Tod walked across the courtyard in a daze, following the Queen’s red cloak as she moved toward a flight of brilliant white marble steps, which led up to the tall silver doors of the Wizard Tower.

Slowly, silently, the doors swung open, and there, standing at the top of the steps, Tod saw a long-robed figure dark against the lambent lights behind. As though from a great distance, Tod heard the Queen call out, “Hey, Septimus!”

A river of brilliant sparkles streamed out from the doors and danced toward her. She heard ringing in her ears. *Is this*, Tod thought, *the sound of Magyk?* A roar from afar filled her head and everything went dark.

“Oh, crumbs,” said the Queen. “She’s fainted.”

AWAKE

Tod opened her eyes and realized that she had no idea where she was. She lay still, looking at the strange shifting patterns all around her, trying to make sense of things. She could smell something sweet and heady. She could hear tinkling sounds of tiny bells, or was it faraway singing? Or both? Slowly, the world began to swim into focus. Tod realized that she was in bed—a bed high off the ground with a tall headboard that rose up behind her. The bed was in some kind of dark-colored tent, the walls of which seemed to move as though in a breeze. Blearily, Tod considered things. So . . . she was in bed. In a tent. Which meant she must be outside. But *why*?

Pushing away fears that she had somehow been caught by Garmin, Tod sat up. *A tent is not a good prison*, she told herself, and besides, the bed was far too comfortable. She threw back the featherlight quilt and swung her legs over the side, her feet not reaching the floor. She noticed that she was wearing a long green nightgown, which felt very soft and extremely strange. Tod had never worn a dress in her life; she was a typical PathFinder girl raised in hooded canvas smocks, tightly woven Fisher jumpers and sailcloth trews.

Tod slipped down from the bed, and the floor felt surprisingly soft and warm. Although her other clothes had disappeared, her father's old fishing vest was neatly folded at the end of the bed. Anxiously, Tod checked the pockets, then smiled with relief—her **PathFinder** box was still safe. In another pocket, her fingers closed around something almost as precious—a pebble splashed with green paint from the last time Dan had painted the shutters, which she had taken from underneath her house to remind her of home. Tod put the salt-stained vest on over her nightgown, then she parted the curtains and peered out.

The scent of incense and the taste of spices on her breath greeted her and gave her the strange feeling of remembering something long forgotten. To her amazement Tod saw that she was indoors; and what was even stranger, she was in a huge room *full* of tents. Tod stepped out of the tent,

letting the soft cloth fall closed behind her, and looked up at the high, vaulted ceiling, which glimmered with a dull blue light like a cloudy night sky. She gazed around and saw that her tent was part of a circle of twelve tents, themselves circular, with the points of their roofs strung from the ceiling on long, shining ropes. Tod shook her head in amazement. Was she still dreaming? And if she wasn't—*where was she?*

Tod padded into the center of the circle, the floor feeling oddly soft and squashy beneath her bare feet. As she stood quiet and still, she became aware of the sound of breathing all around her and she realized that each tent contained its own sleeping occupant. All traces of sleep had now left Tod and a feeling that she was in a good place began to grow within her.

In the dimness, the shape of a door shone out. Tall and arched, it was outlined in a shimmering, greenish blue. Tod decided to see what was on the other side of it. Treading quietly to avoid disturbing any of the occupants of the other tents (although there was no need, because the soft floor dampened all sound), Tod reached the door and gave a tentative push. It swung silently open and she stepped outside.

Tod found herself in a wide corridor, dimly lit with a low blue light. Four other arched doors led off it and the signs on them read: *Senior Girls' Apprentice Dormitory*, *Junior Boys' Apprentice Dormitory*, *Senior Boys' Apprentice Dormitory* and *Apprentice Common Room*. Tod turned back to look at the door she had come through and read the words *Junior Girls' Apprentice Dormitory*. So, thought Tod, she was in some kind of school.

A movement caught Tod's eye and she stepped back against the wall, not wanting to be seen. She watched from the shadows and saw that a purple window at the end of the corridor had suddenly lit up, revealing what looked like a huge silver corkscrew going from the ceiling to the floor, steadily turning. Intrigued, Tod crept forward through the blue-black shadows and then stopped—*there was something on the corkscrew and it was coming through the ceiling*. Pressed against the wall, Tod watched. She realized that she was looking at someone's feet: they were rotating around, moving slowly farther and farther down until Tod could see the whole figure, long-robed in blue and silhouetted against the purple window, traveling ever downward so that soon it was moving through the floor. As the head finally disappeared Tod crept forward and stared at what she now realized were revolving silver spiral stairs.

The light from the purple window faded and Tod guessed that the window only lit up when there was someone on the stairs. As she watched the now-silver stairs still slowly turning, Tod began to piece together a jigsaw of memories. She remembered a wide avenue with burning torches high on their silver torch posts. She remembered going through an amazing blue archway and seeing a flight of brilliant white steps leading up to two tall silver doors. She remembered how the doors had swung open and a stream of purple and blue stars had come tumbling down toward her. She remembered the buzz of **Magyk** all around her . . . and then she remembered nothing more. Nothing until she had woken up inside her tent.

I think, Tod said to herself, I'm in the Wizard Tower.

DANDRA DRAA

Buzzing with excitement, Tod watched the stairs revolving downward and wondered if she was brave enough to step onto them herself. She saw each flat, grooved slab of silver briefly touch the edge of the floor and then move on down, a few seconds later to be replaced with the next tread and then the next. Tod decided to go for it. She was about to step on when she became aware of someone above on the stairs. Quickly, she moved back into the shadows.

Tod saw a solid, well-worn pair of shiny brown boots appear through the hole in the ceiling. Grazing the top of the boots was a purple robe edged in a shimmering purple silk ribbon. Remembering that only the ExtraOrdinary Wizard wore purple, Tod gazed in awe as the young man with purple ribbons hanging from his sleeves slowly rotated down. He was immersed in a book, oblivious to his watcher in the shadows. Her gaze took in a belt of gold and platinum, embellished with **Magykal** signs and symbols, a teardrop-shaped lapis-and-gold amulet around his neck, and as his face came into view she had to suppress a gasp of astonishment. *He was Nicko.* Except . . . Nicko had shaved. And he had taken the braids out of his hair. And was a bit taller. No, he wasn't Nicko, and yet he so very nearly was. And then, as Tod stared at the young man's curly straw-colored hair haloed in purple light she remembered something Nicko had said about the Wizard Tower: *Yeah, some of my brothers work there.* Tod grinned. So the ExtraOrdinary Wizard was one of Nicko's brothers. *Trust Nicko not to mention it,* she thought.

The ExtraOrdinary Wizard disappeared from view and the stairs were now clear. Taking a deep breath, Tod stepped onto them—and felt as though someone had pulled a rug out from under her. She clung on to the central post, determined to get off at the next possible opportunity. What Tod did not know was that the Apprentice dormitories were only one floor above the main entrance hall—known as the Great Hall. She would very soon *have* to get off.

The dim night lighting of the upper domestic floors of the Wizard Tower grew ever brighter as the Great Hall came into view. Down Tod went, past the golden vaulted roof with its nighttime stars (a recent installation of the new ExtraOrdinary Wizard), past the flickering pictures on the wall depicting brave deeds and important moments from the Wizard Tower's history and into the peace and calm of the nighttime Great Hall.

The tread and the floor met and, unsteadily, Tod stepped off onto what felt strangely like sand. Puzzled, she looked down and saw her name slowly appear in the grainy surface: *WELCOME, ALICE TODHUNTER MOON, APPRENTICE.*

Tod gasped. She was an *Apprentice*? How had that happened? She could remember nothing about it. As she stared at the wobbly green letters, the words faded and were replaced with: *SORRY. SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID THAT. MY MISTAKE.* Tod was still staring at the floor, wondering what it might decide to say next, when she became aware of someone at her side. A tall woman with an aquiline nose and thick, short dark hair—through which ran a striking streak of white—had appeared from nowhere. She wore a long, somewhat formal pale blue robe with shiny red ribbons on the hem and elaborate green snakes embroidered up the sleeves. She smiled at Tod delightedly.

"Alice!" she said, grabbing both of Tod's hands in her own. "Are you feeling better now?"

Tod nodded.

"Still wandering around at night," the woman-with-snakes said with a huge smile. She let go of Tod's hands, stepped back and smiled. "Ah, I can see you do not remember me. But then, you were only four."

But Tod did remember. She remembered the shining green eyes and the half-amused smile.

"I am Dandra," the woman said. "Dandra Draa."

"My mother's friend," said Tod.

"Indeed I was." Dandra corrected herself: "No, Alice, I *am* your mother's friend. And I will always be. I promised her that I would be a second mother to you and that when you were fourteen—which is a good age to begin to be acquainted with **Magyk**—you could come to the Wizard Tower and see how you liked the old trade." Dandra took in Tod's bemused look. "The old trade—what some call Wizarding. Or **Magyk**. Sorcery. Bewitchment. Conjuring. Call it what you will. If you have a talent for it,

this is the place to be.” She shook her head. “How the time has flown. I can hardly believe you are fourteen already.”

“I’m not,” Tod said. “I’m twelve.”

“But you have the ring—the snakes upon your thumb,” said Dandra, puzzled. “That’s how I recognized you when they brought you upstairs.” She smiled. “But even if I hadn’t seen your mother’s ring, I would have known you for your mother’s daughter. You are so like Cassi. But why, Alice, are you here so soon?”

“Something happened,” said Tod. She didn’t want to say any more right then.

Dandra saw Tod’s closed expression—her lips pressed together, her eyes suspiciously bright. “I understand,” she murmured. “Things happen.” Dandra looked at her best friend’s daughter and her heart flipped in a little twist of pity. The child looked so thin and disheveled, her black hair sticking up on end, standing there twisting her strange elflock, the same as her father wore, and with such black circles under her dark eyes.

“Come, Alice,” Dandra said. “I will take you back to the dorm. I don’t suppose you’ll be able to find your way back to the right bed now that they’ve stuffed the place with those silly tents.”

Tod was reluctant to go. Greedily, her eyes took in the amazing space around her—the unbelievably tall silver doors rearing up to the full height of the vaulted hall, its seven golden beams arching up from the floor like graceful trees dividing the luminous dark blue ceiling and its dusting of stars into segments like slices of cake. She gazed at the pictures around the walls that faded in and out of view, and her attention was taken by one particularly bright one that showed a small green dragon and rider fighting a monstrous, six-winged, six-eyed dragon.

“Couldn’t I just stay here for a bit?” asked Tod.

Dandra was taking her position as Tod’s second mother very seriously. “It’s very late,” she said, “and you need your sleep. You can see it all in the morning.”

Tod looked crestfallen. She hated the feeling of being the little kid sent back to bed. Dandra reversed the direction of the stairs and Tod was about to step back onto them when a cold draft of air swept into the hall. The great silver doors were opening. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard strode in, across the message that the floor had written—*WELCOME, SEPTIMUS HEAP, EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD*—and made straight for Tod and Dandra. Before

Tod could catch her breath he was standing right beside her and Dandra Draa was saying, “ExtraOrdinary, this is our new guest, Alice TodHunter Moon”—Dandra looked at Tod questioningly—“who still likes to be known as Tod?” she asked.

Tod smiled. “Yes, please,” she said.

The ExtraOrdinary Wizard smiled in return. “Hello, Tod,” he said. “I hope you’re feeling better now?”

“Yes, thank you,” Tod said politely.

“I am taking Alice—I mean, Tod—back to bed,” Dandra said. “I shall be down soon. We have ten minutes still, I think?”

“Eight,” the ExtraOrdinary Wizard said, glancing at his timepiece. “Well, good night, Tod.” He smiled at Tod, and her expression caught him by surprise. It reminded him of how he had once been—lost and confused. It seemed cruel to send her back upstairs to a lonely dormitory. He also knew that it was rare for someone to be so sensitive to **Magyk** that they fainted. He looked at the skinny, wild-looking girl and for a brief moment thought he saw a glint of green in her dark eyes. “But perhaps, Tod, you would like to come and see what we are doing tonight?”

One look at Tod’s face told him what her answer was going to be.

“*Yes, please.*”

MARCIA OVERSTRAND

Tod followed the ExtraOrdinary Wizard down the wide, white marble steps determined to keep her mind clear of the **Magykal** buzzing and singing that threatened to invade it. At the foot of the steps an elderly Wizard with white hair tied back into a ponytail in purple drifted over to join them. He, too, wore purple, and for a moment Tod was confused. She had been told that there was only one ExtraOrdinary Wizard in the Castle—so why were there suddenly two? Through his faded purple robes, Tod saw a stream of brilliant blue lights that were dropping from the top of the Tower, and when the old Wizard moved she saw he was floating some inches above the ground. With a flash of excitement, Tod realized that she was looking at a ghost. She had never seen a ghost before. People said there were some ancient PathFinder ghosts from the Days of Beyond down by the marsh in her village, but they rarely showed themselves and were reputed to look very strange. But this ghost looked like a kindly elderly man. Noticing her gaze, the ghost smiled at her, his friendly green eyes crinkling as he did so.

“A new Apprentice, Septimus?” he said, addressing the ExtraOrdinary Wizard in a voice that sounded, Tod thought, as though he were talking in a large, empty room.

The ExtraOrdinary Wizard caught Tod’s embarrassed look and grinned. “Maybe, Alther. Maybe. But for the moment she is our guest. She is, Dr. Draa tells me, the daughter of an old **Magykal** family. Alther, allow me to introduce Alice TodHunter Moon. Alice, this is Alther, a wise friend and the old tutor of someone we are about to meet. Well, we hope we are about to meet.”

Alther bowed. Tod was not sure what to do. She guessed you couldn’t shake hands with a ghost, so she bowed too.

“How are we doing for time, Septimus?” Alther asked in his oddly distant voice.

Septimus looked at his timepiece again. “We are approaching the Midnight Minutes,” he said.

They gathered at one side of the smooth white marble steps that reached high above their heads, in front of what Tod could see was the outline of an archway sitting beneath the steps like a cupboard under the stairs. The archway had *VII* inscribed on its keystone, which Tod knew was number seven in the ancient PathFinder numbering system. She peered into the arch and saw an eerie white mist swirling deep within it. It reminded her of the one in the woods where she and Oskar had put on their *Tristan* tops.

“It’s weird,” she whispered to Dandra Draa. “It’s like there is something really deep and strange in there.”

Dandra looked at Tod. “In where?” she said.

“Inside the arch,” said Tod.

All eyes turned to Tod and she felt embarrassed. Clearly it was not a time to be chatting. Something serious was about to happen. “Sorry . . .” she whispered.

To Tod’s discomfort the ExtraOrdinary Wizard was looking at her in a very unsettling manner. “*You can see the arch?*” he asked.

Tod nodded.

“What can you see inside?”

“Er. Well, it’s like a tunnel with a kind of swirly white cloud deep inside . . .” Tod’s voice trailed off. She wished he would stop staring at her like that.

“And does the arch have a symbol anywhere?” the ExtraOrdinary Wizard asked, testing her.

“Er, yes. Number seven. But it’s written the ancient way: ‘V,’ One, One.”

“How do you know these numbers, Tod?”

“We’re taught them when we are little. They are PathFinder numbers. Oh! There’s someone in there!” Tod gasped. In the depths of the white mist, she saw the dark shape of a figure.

The arch began to glow with a dull purple light, which became ever brighter. Tod saw the figure coming toward them and then suddenly a tall dark-haired woman in a richly embroidered cloak was striding out into the night air, her green eyes glittering with the reflections of the **Magyk** around her.

“Marcia!” The ExtraOrdinary Wizard sounded relieved. “You made it!”

“Of course I did,” she said. “Alther! Dandra! What a wonderful welcoming committee.” She swung around and threw her arm out

somewhat theatrically toward the archway, which was still shining a brilliant purple. “So, *now* can you see it?” she asked.

“Well, I can *now*,” the ExtraOrdinary Wizard said—a little grumpily, Tod thought. Slowly the purple light began to fade and Tod watched the archway return to just a dark space within the white marble. “It’s gone again,” he complained.

Marcia Overstrand regarded him with impatience. “Of course it hasn’t *gone*, Septimus,” she said. “It is still there, but *you* can’t see it.”

“Neither can I,” said Dandra.

“Well, Dandra, I’m sure you have more important things on your mind,” Marcia said diplomatically. She turned toward the ghost. “Alther?”

The ghost sighed. “I can **Feel** the disturbance, Marcia. But I, too, can see nothing. Sorry.”

“You will eventually,” Marcia told them. “It’s a skill you have to learn.” She took a stick of purple chalk from her pocket. “I will draw the outline. That way, if anyone wants to come and see me”—she looked pointedly at the ExtraOrdinary Wizard—“there is no excuse not to.”

While Marcia drew around the archway, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard turned to Tod. “Do you still see it?” he asked.

Tod nodded.

“Of course I still see it, Septimus,” Marcia said as she stood on tiptoe to reach the highest point of the arch. “How would I draw around it otherwise?”

“Actually, Marcia, I was talking to our young guest here,” Septimus said.

“Oh?” Marcia spun around and peered into the dimness past the steps. She saw for the first time a slight, barefooted girl wearing a scruffy old vest covered with pockets, pulled over an Apprentice nightgown. “Goodness,” she said. “Who is this?”

“Marcia, this is Alice TodHunter Moon, the only one of us who can see your elusive archway. Tod, this is Marcia Overstrand.”

Tod felt quite overawed by the ExtraOrdinary Wizard including her in the “us” of his group of high-powered Wizards.

Marcia frowned. “You can *still* see the archway?” she asked Tod.

“Yes,” said Tod, trying to sound sure. She had the feeling that Marcia did not believe her.

“Well, well,” Marcia said. As she spoke, the tinny chimes of a distant clock drifted in on the still night air: *ting . . . ting . . . ting . . .* Silence fell as they all stood counting the chimes. Tod glanced at the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He looked nervous, she thought. On the twelfth chime Marcia turned to him and said, “Septimus, I know we had arranged for you to **Go Through** on your own tonight on the Midnight Minutes, but this is very interesting *indeed*. Perhaps we could leave that for now and have a little chat instead? Upstairs, Septimus? In your rooms?”

Tod saw momentary relief flicker across the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s features before he managed to suppress it. She didn’t blame him for not wanting to **Go Through** the archway. There was something unnerving about its misty depths.

“With pleasure, Marcia,” he said.

A few minutes later, Tod found herself escorted up the spiral stairs in some style, accompanied not only by the current ExtraOrdinary Wizard, but by the previous two ExtraOrdinaries as well. It felt unreal—and just a little bit scary.

THE TOP OF THE TOWER

On the seventh floor of the Wizard Tower, Dr. Dandra Draa did the last rounds of the night in her Sick Bay and tutted to herself about her protégée being whisked away by the ExtraOrdinaries. Dandra was of the opinion that twelve-year-olds should not be up after midnight. She decided to go to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's rooms as soon as she had finished and insist Tod come back to bed.

“What would Cassi say?” Dandra muttered to herself. “Letting the girl stay up so late?” She sighed. The honest answer was that Cassi, a free spirit, would have been perfectly happy about it. And she would have been thrilled that not only had her daughter shown signs of inheriting the **Magykal** skills of the Draa side of the family, but that it had been recognized so soon by two powerful Wizards.

Poignant memories of the very last time she had seen her friend came rushing back to Dandra. Dandra—a Wizard and a skilled Physician, who came from the Hot, Dry Deserts of the South—had some years ago received a request from Marcia to help with a difficult **DisEnchantment**. Dandra had been only too pleased to leave her home, where things had become very dangerous for her. On her way to the Castle, she had stopped off at the TodHunter Moon household and Dandra still remembered the shock of seeing her old friend. Pale and thin, with a hacking cough and streaming red eyes, it was obvious that Cassi TodHunter Draa was seriously ill. Dandra knew there was nothing she could do to help her. Cassi had the dreaded Sand Sickness, caused by inhaling a small but deadly sand fly—common in Dandra's homeland, but previously unknown in the PathFinder village. Dandra had stayed a few days with Dan and Cassi and had gotten to know their little girl, Alice, who was, she remembered, a very determined tomboy. It was one of the saddest moments of Dandra's life when she had said farewell to the little family, for she knew she would never see them together again. Her heart ached for Dan and Alice—or Tod, as the young Alice insisted on being called—as she waved good-bye from the Trading Post

shuttle boat and began the very last stage of her journey to the fabled Wizard Tower. Dandra had promised Cassi to be a second mother to her little girl if ever she decided to follow the **Magykal** Draa side of the family and come to the Wizard Tower, but Dandra had never expected to see Tod again. She doubted Dan would ever let his one reminder of his beloved Cassi out of his sight. Dandra sighed. But now poor Dan was gone too. Who would have thought it? Forlornly, Dr. Dandra Draa continued her midnight rounds of the Sick Bay.

Meanwhile, in the rooms of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Tod's head was buzzing with **Magyk** and excitement. She was ensconced on a small stool next to the fire, which burned with **Magykal** multicolored flames. The room was filled with dancing shadows and fleeting purple lights that Tod could see only at the very edge of her vision. The room had an odd, echoing quality to it. It felt quite bare, apart from the heavy purple curtains on the windows and a small, furry rug beside the fire. It was sparsely furnished, as though someone had only recently moved in.

There was, however, an unusual purple sofa in front of the fire, on which Marcia had settled herself. She leaned back, kicked off the most astonishing pair of shoes that Tod had ever seen—purple snakeskin with tiny green jade buttons—and gave a contented sigh. “It’s nice to be back,” Marcia said, wiggling her toes. “It’s so *warm* here.”

The ghost of Alther Mella floated down next to Marcia, and to Tod's surprise, the young ExtraOrdinary Wizard sat on the floor beside her. “Now,” he said to Tod. “If I am calling you Tod, then you must call me Septimus. Okay?”

Tod smiled shyly. “Okay,” she said.

“Likewise, Marcia is just Marcia and Alther is just Alther. We don't use our titles when we are among people who understand **Magyk**.”

“Unless they are being *very* annoying,” Marcia put in.

“Marcia was ExtraOrdinary Wizard here up until six months ago,” Septimus explained. “But she has now found more interesting things to do. Like go wandering through all kinds of strange arches—arches that none of us can see. Except for you, Tod, it seems.”

“Oh!” said Tod, somewhat lost for words. She could not quite believe what was happening. She sat very still, breathed in the **Magykal** air and

listened to Marcia and Septimus bicker in the way that only old friends can do.

“Septimus, you exaggerate,” Marcia was protesting. “It is just this one archway at the Wizard Tower that you can’t see. All the others are perfectly clear; I don’t know what you are fussing about. I suspect there has been some kind of **Invisibility** screen put on this arch, and you know how **Invisibility** soaks into marble. You just can’t get it out however hard you try. But it is only a matter of practice before you see it.”

“Maybe.” Septimus sounded unconvinced.

Marcia was now in full flow. “And to set the record straight, Septimus, I did not ‘find more interesting things to do,’ as you put it. It was time for me to go. The worst thing an ExtraOrdinary Wizard can do is to outstay her welcome. Look at that Brynna Jackson woman, she hung on until she was ninety-three. The Wizard Tower was a complete mess for years after that.”

“You had a little way to go until you were ninety-three,” Septimus pointed out.

“A little,” Marcia agreed. “But I was in the job for twenty-one years; it’s best to go when your powers are at their height.” She sat back and sniffed the air appreciatively. “You know, Septimus, you must be doing something right—I have never felt so much **Magyk** in the air. It’s quite exhilarating.”

A companionable silence fell as they watched the multicolored flames of the fire leap and dance in the darkness and Tod suppressed a yawn. It had been a very long day and it was beginning to catch up with her.

Alther spoke, and Tod felt goose bumps run down her neck. It struck her that there was no warning when a ghost was about to speak, because there was no intake of breath—it was very peculiar. “We should not keep this child up for any longer than necessary,” Alther said, his voice drifting into the room.

“No, of course not,” said Marcia. “Now, Tod, tell me. Are you by any chance a PathFinder?”

Tod stared at Marcia in astonishment. How did she know? It wasn’t as if Tod’s skin showed up shiny at night like most PathFinders. “I’m half PathFinder,” she said. “My dad is—I mean, was—a PathFinder.”

Marcia nodded. “And your mother is from a **Magykal** tribe?”

Tod felt almost spooked. How did Marcia know so much about her? “My mother was a Draa. But she is not alive now. Dr. Draa is a distant cousin. And she was my mother’s friend, too.”

Septimus understood that it was not easy to talk of one's dead mother and father. "Enough questions about parents, Marcia," he said. "I am sure Tod doesn't want to talk about that tonight."

"Of course," Marcia agreed. "But you *are* from a PathFinder village, Tod?"

Relieved not to have to talk about her parents, Tod began to speak about her PathFinder village and the terrible things that had happened. A solemn silence fell in the room as the three ExtraOrdinaries listened to her story.

As Tod drew to a close, Septimus said, "Tod, this is terrible. You must consider the Wizard Tower your home for as long as you wish."

Marcia leaned forward impatiently. "But the reason I asked if you were a PathFinder is because a few years ago a friend of ours named Marwick found something rather exciting—a system of Ancient Ways that stretch across the world. And you get into them always through an archway. Most of these archways are in what is called a Hub—like a crossroads, really, where some Ways meet. Anyone can see the archways in a Hub. Even Septimus." Marcia flashed Septimus a smile. "But there are other arches that are not in Hubs and they tend to be **Hidden**. These arches are always, Marwick said, at the end of what he called a blind Way—a Way that does not go to a Hub, but to one place only. And, you see, Marwick once said a very strange thing to me. He said he wished he were a PathFinder. I asked him what he meant and he said that PathFinders can see all the **Hidden** arches."

"Have you seen any other arches, Tod?" Septimus asked.

"No," said Tod. And then she suddenly remembered the creepy arch where she and Oskar had put on their *Tristan* tops—which felt like a lifetime ago. "Well, maybe I *did* see one," she said. "In a wood near the OutPost."

"The OutPost, eh? Now let's see if we can work out which one that would be." From a pocket inside her voluminous cloak, Marcia extracted a long silver tube. She pulled a cork from the end of it and eased out a scroll of grubby, crinkled paper. She carefully unrolled it to reveal what looked to Tod like a drawing of a fishing net made by someone with her eyes closed.

"This," said Marcia, "was drawn by Marwick. It is, he told me, a map of the Ancient Ways and it covers the whole world."

"The whole *world*?" Tod breathed.

“Amazing, isn’t it? I didn’t believe him at first,” Marcia said. “And neither did you, did you, Septimus?”

Septimus shook his head. He felt bad about that still. But at least, he thought, his older brother Sam had believed Marwick. Septimus gazed at his old friend Marwick’s spiderlike scrawl with a pang of sadness. The paper circle began to roll itself back up and Marcia quickly passed her hand over it. A flicker of purple light followed her hand and the paper obediently unrolled and lay as flat as a piece of glass.

Marcia put on a pair of small, round spectacles and joined Septimus on the rug. Unsettlingly, Alther floated off the sofa and hovered above the map, looking down at it. Tod found it hard to concentrate on the map with the ghost hanging in the air, his robes showing no sign of being affected by gravity at all.

The map was nothing like the sea charts that Tod was used to. At the very center was a circle carefully colored in blue. It was numbered like a clockface with twelve Roman numerals and contained a spiral and a heart-shaped symbol. Marcia placed a long, elegant finger on it. “Marwick told us that this is the Heart of the Ways. It’s the very center of the network and is reputed to be made of solid lapis lazuli and built by a snake or something. *Very* strange. He never found it, though. Well . . . not as far as we know.”

“Maybe he and Sam are there now,” Septimus murmured.

Tod had a question. “But if Marwick never got there, how did he know what it was like?”

“Well, Marwick lived on an island on the Marram Marshes,” said Septimus. “You would have come past the marshes on your way up the river. It’s a wild and weird place where the Dragon Boat used to lie hidden in an old temple beneath the ground.”

“But why was the Dragon Boat under the ground?” asked Tod.

“That,” said Marcia firmly, “is another story for another time.”

Septimus continued. “So, in this old temple Marwick found a sphere of lapis lazuli covered in a network of lines. He borrowed my best **Enlarging Glass** to have a closer look at it and he never gave it back.” Septimus grinned ruefully. “He was a little scatty, was Marwick. Anyway, he realized that the lines all joined up and he figured it was a map. So he drew it out flat and thought no more of it—until one day at the back of a shelf, he found a little book called *The Ancient Ways of the World*. And in the book was a map just like the one he had drawn. It turned out to be a kind of

guidebook, and that's how Marwick got interested. It seemed from the map that there was an archway somewhere on his island, so he started looking. He eventually found it when he was sweeping out the old temple. He said he just saw a kind of dent in the wall, walked straight at it and ended up in a jungle somewhere.

“He was stunned. He was thousands of miles from home, yet he had traveled there almost in an instant. He discovered that he was in an overgrown circle of twelve arches, each one numbered, one to twelve.” Septimus smiled at Tod. “With your PathFinder numbers. He explored a little and found that each arch led to another Hub—or sometimes to a single **Hidden** arch. Marwick was hooked. He and my brother Sam began to explore and they ended up all over the world. Marwick said it was easy to find your way back home as you just took note of the number of the arch you had come out of. He and Sam took the map with them and noted down all the numbers and where everything went and which Ways still worked—not all of them do, he said. And of course, really the map should be in three dimensions. Even so, it's pretty amazing.”

Tod peered at the map, fascinated. She could see the faint numbers in different colors and the wiggly descriptions of some of the Hubs—*Beware Snake Pit, Deep in Sand, Temple with Priest Expecting Gift*—gave Tod the strange feeling of a whole world laid out before her.

Marcia took over. “Every now and then, Marwick and Sam would come and see me and update my map. It was so fascinating, Tod. And, after years of being at the Castle I began to get itchy feet. I longed to travel and see the world too.”

Tod was beginning to understand how Marcia felt.

“So, Tod, last year while I was still ExtraOrdinary Wizard, while I was traveling with a dear friend, I found a beautiful old tower called the Keep. And deep in the basement of the Keep to my amazement I found what I knew was a Hub. It was choked with earth and had been used as a rubbish pit but I could not stop thinking about it. Here was my chance to have my own entrance to the Ancient Ways. My chance to travel the world. So I sold what was left of my collection of Fragile Fairy pots—they had suddenly become very popular—and bought the Keep.”

A ghostly voice from above the map made Tod jump. “But not until she had made sure I had been to a party there. In my wild youth.” The ghost chuckled.

This was all too strange for Tod to take in. She leaned back against the wall beside the fireplace, and it was only the pressure of the warm stone behind her that told her she was not dreaming.

Marcia laughed. “Alther is not as crazy as he sounds, Tod,” she said. “One of the rules of ghosthood is . . .”

“A ghost may only tread once more where, Living, he has trod before,” Alther finished for her. “Which means I can’t go somewhere new anymore. Ever. So remember that, young Tod. Go to as many places in your life as you possibly can. Goodness, Septimus, if I had known about these Ancient Ways then you wouldn’t have kept me out of them for one moment. Think of all the places I could go to now.”

Septimus shook his head. “It’s not *all* good, Alther. I am concerned that using these Ways opens us up to all kinds of Incursions. Who knows who or what might come through to the Wizard Tower.”

“I should have thought it was *more* secure now I’m living at the Keep,” Marcia countered. “Anything that comes here has to come through my Hub first.”

The heavy purple door to the rooms swung silently open and Dandra Draa walked in.

“Oh, Dandra!” Marcia said, rather guiltily.

“Marcia, it is very nearly one o’clock,” Dandra said sternly. “I do think Alice should come to bed now.”

Tod thought so too. Her head was fuzzy with **Magyk** and the new ideas she had been trying to take in. She felt so tired she could have fallen asleep right there.

Marcia, Septimus and Alther wished her good night and as Dandra shepherded her out, Tod saw Septimus and Marcia head out toward a little brightly lit kitchen. “I have some really wild new coffee,” Septimus was saying. “Would you like to try some?”

“I’d love to,” Marcia replied.

Tod watched Septimus and Marcia together. Septimus was half a head taller than Marcia and he wore his ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes well, Tod thought. His long purple tunic hung from his broad shoulders and the ExtraOrdinary Wizard platinum-and-gold belt sat easily around his waist. As Septimus stood back to let Marcia go first, Tod saw Marcia put her hand on his shoulder and say, “I hope that coffeepot is behaving properly now.”

Septimus groaned. “That coffeepot is in disgrace. I’ve locked it in the cupboard. It’s a one-woman pot, Marcia. It’s yours to take home.”

Marcia laughed. “Poor old pot. Septimus, how *could* you lock it away?”

“Easy,” said Septimus. “Just one turn of the key.” Tod heard the smile in his voice as he disappeared into the kitchen.

Tod could tell there was a private space between Septimus and Marcia that no one intruded upon. It made her feel suddenly lonely; there was no one she was close to now. She was very far from home indeed.

And then Dandra put her arm around her shoulders and drew Tod out of the room. “Time,” she said firmly, “for bed.”

On the first floor in the Junior Girls’ Apprentice Dorm, Tod was asleep, but in her dreams she was awake and running, slow and scared, beneath the water. She was looking for Dan, just as she did every night, but now she was pursued by the dreaded sounds: *clicker-click-click . . . click-click . . . clicker-click*. And in her dreams she understood what the clicks were saying.

“We know where you are, Alice TodHunter Moon. We know where you are and *we are coming to get you.*”

TOWER TOUR

Tod woke late to a feeling that she was the last one in the dormitory. She lay still for a while, listening to the purposeful hum of **Magyk** as the day-to-day work of the Wizard Tower proceeded, then she pushed back her covers and jumped out of bed onto the soft, warm floor. At the end of the bed were her clean sailing trews, striped top and canvas shoes. Tod smiled, pleased to see the adventurous part of herself back once more.

Ten minutes later she bumped into Dandra Draa in the Apprentice corridor.

“Aha,” said Dandra, “I thought you’d be up. I’m your Wizard Tower guide for today. How does breakfast and then a tour sound to you?”

It sounded pretty good to Tod.

By the end of the day, Tod’s head was in a whirl. Dandra had shown her every part of the Wizard Tower it was possible for a non-Wizard to see, and much that wasn’t. Now Tod felt tired and frazzled. The constant presence of **Magyk**—as much as she loved it—was exhausting. So when, on her way back with Dandra from viewing the **Sealed Cell** lobby, Tod saw a familiar face in the Great Hall, she felt almost tearful with relief. “Nicko!” she called out.

Nicko was sitting on the waiting bench. Hearing his name, he jumped to his feet. “Hey, Tod!” he called out. “How’s it going—weird?”

“A bit,” Tod admitted.

“I’m not surprised,” Nicko said. “Ever since Sep—I mean, the new ExtraOrdinary Wizard—took over, this place has been buzzing like a swarm of bees.” He grinned at Dandra. “*You* may not notice it, but personally, it gives me a headache.”

Dandra smiled. “You’ve been away on your boat for too long, Nicko.”

“Maybe,” Nicko said. “And talking of boats, Tod—Snorri and I wondered if you would like to have supper with us on the *Adventurer* and

get out of all this fizzy-fuzzy **Magyk** stuff.”

“I would love to have supper on the *Adventurer*,” said Tod. “And to see Snorri. And Ullr.” She turned to Dandra. “May I?”

“Of course,” Dandra said. She reached up to a small box high on the wall, pulled a long, thin purple card from it and handed it to Tod. “The night password. You will need this to get back in.”

Tod buttoned the card into one of the many pockets in Dan’s fishing vest. It was good to feel part of the Wizard Tower—to have the password just like she truly belonged.

On the *Adventurer*, everything seemed happily simple and familiar. Tod sat in the cabin dipping crusty bread into the big pot of stew that Nicko had cooked, while the Night Ullr lay in the doorway keeping guard.

“So, Tod,” Snorri said in her singsong accent. “How was today?”

Tod took a gulp of lemonade. “Amazing,” she said.

“And your mother’s friend?”

“I love Dandra. Look, she did this. It’s real **Magyk!**” Tod took her paint-splashed pebble out of her pocket and held it in her palm. Nicko glanced at Snorri with a smile. He guessed what was going to happen.

Very gently, Tod stroked the pebble. It slowly opened two little black eyes and stretched out four stumpy legs. “It’s a pet rock,” she said.

“So it is,” said Nicko. “And they are greedy little things, pet rocks, so don’t feed it too much because it will get very heavy and lazy.”

“Oh! Have you got one too?” asked Tod.

“No, but Jen—I mean, the Queen—has lots. They live in the Rockery at the Palace. You must take yours down to meet them. With those green splashes all over it there is no chance of losing it.”

“Does it have a name?” asked Snorri.

“Not yet,” said Tod. “I’m going to get to know it first.” She stroked the pebble once more and it closed its eyes, drew in its stumpy legs and became just a green-spattered pebble.

“So, Tod,” said Nicko, “it’s been a good day?”

“Yes, it has,” said Tod. “Dandra told me so much about my mother and about . . . about Dad, too. She’d like me to stay if I want to. I can live with her and decide what I want to do. It’s what she promised my mother.” Tod sighed. “But . . . oh, it’s silly, I know. But I’ve been thinking . . .”

“About home?” asked Snorri.

Tod nodded. “I . . . guess I didn’t really understand that I was leaving, maybe forever. But now that I’m here, I keep thinking about Oskie and Ferdie. And Rosie and Jonas and little Torr and Jerra and . . . and how good they were to me. But I just ran away and left them. I can’t believe I did that.” Tod put her head in her hands.

Snorri put her arms around Tod. “You did not run away. You left because it was your parents’ wish.”

Tod shook her head. “I ran away. And left my friends in a total *mess*.”

Nicko leaned forward. “Tod, you chose between two courses. And that is the trouble with choosing—there is always the one you didn’t take. It may have been better, it may have been worse, but that’s not the point. You could not choose both. And sometimes, when the tide is running fast, you have only one chance to decide. You do your best at the time, with what you know then. It’s tough, but that’s how it goes. Personally, I think you caught the tide just right.”

Tod shook her head. She wished she could feel so sure.

“You see, Tod, life is like a sea passage,” said Snorri. “You sail your boat the best you can, but sometimes there is a storm. All you can do is to keep a steady hand on the tiller and hope for better weather.”

Nicko grinned. “You’re doing pretty well so far. Not hit any rocks yet.”

But somewhere in the middle of a dark forest, rocks were appearing. Mitza Draddenmora Draa was nervously standing in the middle of a prowling circle of Garmin, clutching one of Tod’s old tops. She threw it into the pack with a yell. “Find!”

PASSWORD

It was late in the evening when Tod walked back through the boatyard with Nicko and Snorri. They headed along the tunnel that burrowed through the thick Castle walls and out into a lantern-lit path that wound behind a straggle of typically tall, narrow Castle houses. The path came to an end at an impressive wall, beyond which Tod could see the Wizard Tower rising up, awash with lights. There was a gate set into the wall and Nicko gave it a push. It swung open into the Wizard Tower courtyard and Tod felt her worries fading as the exhilaration of the **Magyk** swirling beyond took over.

She turned to Nicko and Snorri and hugged them both. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for *everything*.”

“We shall come with you to the doors, Tod,” said Snorri.

But Tod wanted to be alone with the nighttime **Magyk** chasing through the courtyard. Proudly, she held up her purple password card. “I’m fine, thanks. I’ve got my night password.”

Nicko understood—sometimes he just wanted to be alone with his boat and the sea. “Tod’s okay,” he said to Snorri. And then to Tod, “We’ll be at the boatyard tomorrow. Come and see us, yes?”

Tod smiled. “Yes, please.”

Nicko gave her a thumbs-up and closed the gate.

Tod wandered slowly across the courtyard, savoring the sensation of moving through **Magyk**, feeling as if she were walking underwater. A delicate purple light suffused the air; long, slow, lazy arcs of indigo, green and orange were dropping down from the Wizard Tower like pinpoints of light from an enormous firework. Tod walked dreamily through the lights, some of which landed at her feet, bouncing up into the air again and then zooming away, flashing upward like shooting stars in reverse. The air felt sharp and alive, popping and fizzing as she drifted through it, heading toward the shimmering marble steps that rose up to the silver doors.

At the foot of the steps, Tod stopped and looked up at the Wizard Tower, entranced by the myriad of purple windows flickering so subtly that she

could only see the movement when she looked away from them. One in particular—the **UnStable** window that Dandra had showed her that morning—caught Tod’s attention. As she gazed at it, trying to figure out whether it was there or not, she became aware of another kind of movement. She swung around and to her horror, Tod saw the unmistakable pale, flat-headed shape of a Garmin lurking in the shadows at the base of the Wizard Tower.

A flight of steps had never felt so long and so exposed. Tod raced up them, and at the top, with a stab of fear, she realized that she had forgotten the password and *she no longer had the purple card in her hand*. Near to panic, Tod guessed she must have dropped it as she fled up the steps. Slowly, she turned around and there was the slip of card lying dark against the white of the lowest step. But not far beyond it stood the tall, unwieldy shape of a Garmin.

Confused by the onslaught of the courtyard **Magyk**, the Garmin was standing still, its big, heavy head swaying from side to side. Tod could tell it had not seen her. She had a few moments to retrieve the password—and she knew that if she hesitated, those moments would be gone. Going against all her instincts Tod crept down the steps, toward the slip of purple and toward the Garmin. Reaching the last step but one, she snatched up the card and turned to run back up. Her sudden movement was her downfall.

Click-click-click.

A metallic flash of yellow eyes caught her gaze. Tod tried to look away but all her strength had left her. Nothing seemed to work anymore.

Click-clicker-click. Click-clicker-clicker-click.

No more than half a minute later, the tall silver doors to the Wizard Tower opened and Dandra Draa came hurrying out. She stopped and listened, then she hurried down the steps. The **Magyk** was disturbed—*something was wrong*.



PART VII

AN INCURSION OF ILL INTENT

Marcia Overstrand was sitting in her favorite place in the world—a window seat high up in the circular, central room of her Keep.

Marcia rarely went to bed before the early hours of the morning, and many a night would she wander through the Keep with only a lighted candle for company, getting to know every nighttime creak, every shadow, every strip of moonlight that glanced in through its arrow-slit windows. After the thrum of the Wizard Tower, so full of people demanding her time, Marcia savored the luxury of being alone, of having space and time to think and maybe—when she finally unwound from the frenetic years of being responsible for everything—rediscovering her own personal **Magyk**.

To reach her window, Marcia had climbed some narrow steps set into the window alcove, which nestled inside the ten-foot-thick walls, and was now sitting on the rug and cushions, gazing down at the scene below. The nearly new moon cast little light, but lanterns illuminated the lumps and bumps of the ancient, earth-covered outer walls that surrounded the Keep. Beyond these was a fine stone quay—newly constructed with a line of lanterns placed along it, ready to guide a ship called the *Cerys* safely home up the wide and wild estuary.

Reveling in the silence, the peace of the old stones and the knowledge that no one was going to bang on her door and demand that she *do something right now*, Marcia gazed dreamily out at the night. The water was high and Marcia—who had once paid very little attention to tides and all things concerning boats, but who now knew the tide times backward—wondered if tonight she would see the *Cerys* coming home once more.

The evening mist began to roll in. Soon it covered the white stone of the quay and was creeping up the grass. It lay low like a blanket so that above it, Marcia could still see the star-filled sky. With the arrival of the mist, Marcia supposed she had her Keep to herself for another night. She settled herself among the cushions and picked up a much-thumbed book,

Marwick's housewarming gift to her, a precious copy of *The Ancient Ways of the World*. Marcia drew her thick woolen cloak around her against the night chill that was creeping in. She turned to chapter thirteen, ominously titled "Incursions of Ill Intent," and began to read.

Marcia was not entirely alone in her Keep. On the lower levels lived three Drummins. Drummins were small humanoid creatures who originally came from the Great Chamber of **Fyre** below the Castle. Marcia had been deeply suspicious of Drummins when she had first encountered them, for they were the result of the ancient Alchemists tinkering with human life, of which she did not approve. But over the seven years since their rediscovery, Marcia had grown to like and respect them. And so, when she had moved into the Keep and three elderly Drummins had offered to come with her, Marcia had not needed much persuading. They were quiet, practical creatures and she knew she could rely on them.

Fabius, Lucius and Claudius Drummin preferred not to venture aboveground. Their domain was beneath the earth and they were perfectly happy guarding the Hub and tending the fire in the kitchen. So when Marcia heard a soft, apologetic cough beside her, she looked up to see a pair of ginger eyebrows beneath which the large dark eyes of Fabius Drummin gazed at her. The Drummin's broad, suckered fingers gripped the deep stone windowsill and his face was anxious beneath his long, plaited beard.

Marcia put her book down at once. "What is it, Fabius?" she asked.

Fabius was a Drummin of few words; like most Drummins, he preferred to use signing. "Trouble," he said.

Marcia was down the window steps in an instant. The Drummin scurried across the main chamber and Marcia hurried after him, heading through the archway and onto the stone spiral stairs that would take them down to the lower levels. Fabius turned around and placed his finger to his lips to caution Marcia to be quiet; Marcia was glad that she was wearing her soft purple fur boots, which allowed her to pad as silently as any Drummin—although clearly not quite as silently as Fabius would have liked. They descended through three levels. The first level was the entrance chamber, and once they were past that and heading down to the second level, the temperature began to rise. This was what the Drummins called the Fire Pit, though it was actually the kitchen where they tended the fire, cooked very simple food and slept.

Marcia and Fabius continued down the narrow, gently curving stairs, with a musty smell of damp earth becoming ever stronger as they headed for the Hub.

The Hub itself was relatively small. Down in the foundations of the Keep, the walls were extremely thick, but radiating into them like spokes from a wheel were twelve vaulted tunnels, each with a stone arch at its opening. The arches were labeled with PathFinder numbers one to twelve. The tunnels did not appear to be long—about twenty feet at the most—because each one ended in strange swirling white mist, which Marwick had called the **Vanishing Point**.

Marcia hurried into the Hub to find the other two Drummins waiting, their notoriously sharp flick-knives held ready to open in the blink of an eye.

What is the thing? Marcia signed. She was not as good at Drummin signing as she wanted to be and her attempts provided the Drummins with much amusement, though they appreciated the fact she was trying to learn.

Garmin out of Way Two, Claudius signed, pointing at the arch behind him with the figure *II* on the keystone.

Into Seven, added Lucius, rather unnecessarily pointing at the almost opposite arch sporting the number *VII*.

Unfortunately, finished Fabius.

Marcia was horrified. Too flustered to sign, she whispered, “*Garmin? Are you sure?*”

The three Drummins nodded in unison.

Shh, Fabius signed. *They are coming*.

Which road? Marcia signed.

Seven.

A feeling of relief washed over Marcia. If the Garmin were coming back from the Wizard Tower so soon, surely they would not have had time to do anything terrible. Marcia’s relief did not last long—a moment later a streak of white burst out of Way VII. She was aghast. The creatures—a terrifying mixture of reptile and human—were far bigger than she had expected. They hurtled across the Hub, oblivious to its occupants, and then they were gone, white skin and sinew disappearing into the shadows of Way II.

Marcia was shocked. She raced across to Way II and, summoning all her energy, she pulled a shimmering purple **Magykal Seal** across its arch to

protect it against any more Incursions of Ill Intent. Marcia was just beginning on the next arch—for she had no idea what else might be coming through or from where—when a shout from the Drummins made her swing around. Coming out of Way VII was another Garmin, but this one was in great distress. Limping, its mouth hanging slackly open with thick drools of saliva dripping down, its flat, forked black tongue lolling out, the creature blundered blindly toward Way II, hit the **Seal** and bounced off, stunned. Marcia and the Drummins froze, revulsion prickling their skin. They watched the creature stagger in circles with its great flat head drooping down and then wander unsteadily out of the Hub and up the stairs.

Three Drummin flick-knives snapped open. “We will get it,” Fabius said.

Stunned, Marcia watched the Drummins race up the stairs in pursuit. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself and stop her hands from shaking. She must **Seal** the other Ways—and fast. Marcia was renewing her attention to Way III when she heard a hollow, echoing sound coming from Way VII—footsteps. *Human* footsteps. Hurried. Panicked.

A moment later, Dandra Draa came racing out, carrying a large, shiny silver cocoon in her arms. “Alice!” cried Dandra.

“What?” said Marcia.

“*Alice*. Oh, I mean, Tod. She’s in here—in a Garmin cocoon. Oh, Marcia. I promised Cassi I’d look after her and look what’s happened! Oh, please help. *Please!*”

“Upstairs,” Marcia said briskly. “We need warmth, fire. We must hurry.” It was only as she headed across to the stairs that Marcia remembered the lone, injured Garmin at large somewhere above. She stopped, unsure what to do, and at that moment something huge and white appeared, airborne, heading down the stairs toward her. Marcia leaped out of the way just in time. The creature hit the flagstones with a *crunch* and lay immobile. A heavy footfall came thundering down the steps after it and, to Marcia’s astonishment, a piratical-looking man came into view, brandishing a heavy stick. “Milo!” she cried.

“Marcia!” gasped Milo.

Marcia looked down at the Garmin, leaking thick black fluid across the white flagstones of the Hub. “Is it dead?” she asked.

Milo poked the creature with his foot. “Yes.”

“Good,” said Marcia. “Come on, Dandra. Quickly now.”

Dandra gave Milo a strained smile as, bemused, he stepped back to let them pass. It took Milo a few seconds to recover his wits, and then he yelled up, “Marcia! What’s going *on*?”

“No time! Explain later!” Marcia called back.

From the foot of the stairs, Milo watched his wife of one year to the day disappear around the first spiral. He shook his head in bemusement. He had hoped that life here would be more simple, but he now realized how silly that had been. Marcia didn’t do simple.

COCOON

The silver cocoon lay on the rug in front of the impressive fireplace in the Great Chamber. Thanks to Milo the flames were roaring up into the tall stone chimneypiece, sending out the heat that Marcia wanted.

“I can’t believe there is a human being in there,” Milo said, somberly gazing at the cocoon. “It looks so tiny.”

“It has been **Compressed**,” said Marcia. “A **Darke** art, showing no respect for human life whatsoever. You’d be surprised how small the human body can become.”

“And still live?” asked Dandra anxiously.

“For a while.” Marcia was running her hands over the cocoon, trying to find a way in through the tough membrane, which felt as unyielding and strong as steel. “Milo, would you lend me your silver knife, please?”

Milo took out a small knife folded into its ebony handle and handed it to Marcia. She opened it and breathed on the blade, muttering, “**Unbind the thing that binds, unwind the thing that winds.**” Then she pushed the tip of the blade—like all Milo’s knives, razor-sharp—in between what she judged to be a join in the membrane. To her relief, she was right. Marcia plunged her hand in and felt the body of a small human beneath. “Milo, Dandra. Take hold of this horrid stuff. Pull it away before it sticks back together again.”

Milo and Dandra both took hold of the unpleasantly sticky substance and pulled. It resisted but neither was going to be defeated. They tugged at the membrane so it stretched out like a long, transparent piece of silk. Marcia began frantically sawing at it with the blade. Suddenly, it was cut and like a spring released from tension, the cocoon fell apart.

Inside was the folded-up form of a girl, legs and arms crossed like, thought Marcia, a dressed goose ready for dinner.

“Good Lord,” said Milo.

“Oh, *Alice!*” gasped Dandra.

Milo had never seen Marcia “at work,” as he called it. He watched in awe as Marcia lifted Tod’s head, which was limp and heavy, and gently moved her damp, matted hair away from her bluish-white face. He saw Marcia take a deep breath in, and in, and in, until it seemed impossible that she could breathe in any more without bursting. He saw her lean over the girl’s face and begin to breathe out in a slow, steady stream, her warm, **Magykal** breath a soft, pale pink against the night air.

As Marcia was breathing out, Milo realized that he was doing the same. But Milo ran out of breath long before Marcia did. On and on, the long, thin stream of pinkish air curled out from her mouth and settled over Tod’s pale, damp features. And just as Milo was convinced that Marcia could breathe out not a moment longer, he saw Tod’s eyelids flicker and then suddenly, her dark gray eyes were wide open, staring straight at him.

“You’re safe. Sleep now,” Marcia murmured.

“Oh. Oh, thank goodness,” Dandra whispered.

Tod took in a long, deep, shuddering breath; the air tasted sweet and smoky and wonderfully warm. The coldness of the reptilian slime had chilled her to the bone and now the warmth set her shivering. She wanted to ask where she was, what had happened, but her teeth were chattering uncontrollably. Someone put a blanket around her shoulders and Tod pulled it tighter. She felt as though she would never be warm again.

“Alice . . . oh, *Alice*.” Someone else put her arms around her and Tod felt warm breath on her face. She found herself being gently laid down on cushions and blankets, soft and warm, and slowly, she began to feel more human. Tod looked up and saw three worried, pale faces smiling down at her and she savored the presence of humans—their body warmth, the expressiveness of their faces. Someone placed another blanket over her and Tod closed her eyes, knowing that she was safe.

Dandra got shakily to her feet. “She’s sleeping now,” she whispered, gazing down at Tod, who looked very small and thin beneath the blankets. Dandra hugged Marcia. “Thank you, oh, thank you,” she said. “But I must go. I have a patient in Sick Bay, dying, I think. And I’ve left the Apprentice on his own. Oh, I don’t want to go, but I must.”

“Dandra, it’s all right,” Marcia said. “We will look after your Alice. We’ll stand guard all night, don’t you worry.” She stood back and looked at her friend. “You could do with some rest yourself. Goodness, what have you done to your hand?” Blood was dripping off Dandra Draa’s knuckles.

Dandra looked at her hand in surprise. “I must have hurt it when I punched that Garmin on the nose.”

“You hit a Garmin?” Marcia was amazed.

“Well, I had to get Alice away from it somehow. Couldn’t think what else to do, really.”

“Oh, Dandra, you are amazing,” said Marcia. She put her arm around her friend’s shoulders. “Milo will watch over Tod,” she said. “I’ll see you home.”

“Don’t be long,” said Milo.

Down in the Hub, at the foot of the stairs, Dandra and Marcia stepped over the dead Garmin lying folded like a squashed spider in a pool of ink. They both shuddered. “Milo will clear it up in the morning,” Marcia said briskly.

Before she left the Hub, Marcia placed a **Seal** on every Way except for VII. And when she returned from taking Dandra back to the Wizard Tower, she **Sealed** Way VII, too.

Upstairs in the Great Chamber in the red glow cast by the fire, Marcia found Milo waiting beside the sleeping figure of Tod.

“How is she?” Marcia whispered.

“Fine,” said Milo. “Sleeping soundly.”

“I’ll watch her all night,” said Marcia. “Just to make sure.”

“*All night?*” asked Milo, dismayed. “But, Marcia, I came back especially.”

Marcia reached out and touched Milo’s hand. “I am so pleased you did. I was sure you hadn’t made it. The mist came in so fast.”

“I left *Cerys* on the seaward quay and rowed up,” said Milo. “Followed the mist as it rolled in. I had to be here.”

Marcia smiled happily. “Well, we can spend the night here by the fire. I’ll ask Lucius to do us some supper.”

Milo looked downcast. Cooking was not one of a Drummin’s finest skills. “You still don’t have a cook, then?”

“I don’t want my Keep cluttered up with people—especially people who cook. They are nothing but trouble,” Marcia said. “Anyway, Lucius is getting much better. He’s very good at omelets. And gooseberry bake.”

“Omelet and gooseberry bake it is, then,” said Milo stoutly. “I’ll go and tell him, shall I?” He got to his feet.

It was only later, when Milo went down to the Fire Pit to pick up the supper, that he realized he had not made himself clear. In one large dish sat an omelet wrapped around a pile of gooseberries covered with cheesy bread crumbs. “It’s a good thing I also brought some Trading Post chocolates,” said Milo, handing Marcia a large, velvet-covered box tied with a big gold ribbon. “Happy anniversary.”

GRULA-GRULA

The next morning, Tod felt very nearly human again. She wanted to go back to the Wizard Tower, but Marcia felt Tod's forehead and frowned.

"You are still somewhat cold, Alice," she said. "You need to get warm all the way through. Come and sit in the sun, there is nothing better for getting rid of the lingering chill of **Darkenesse**."

And so Tod spent the morning sitting in Marcia's window alcove, soaking up the sun and watching Milo's ship, the *Cerys*, come in on the high tide. In her hand she held a beautiful silver whistle covered in **Magykal** symbols, which Marcia had given her.

"The Hub is secure and the Drummins will take good care of you," Marcia had said, "but even so, I'd like you to have this. If you need help, just blow. I'll hear."

"But how?" Tod asked. "Aren't you going to the Wizard Tower?"

Marcia held up a twin of the whistle, which she was wearing around her neck. "It's a nice simple way of using **Magyk**," she explained. "You blow your whistle and this one sounds. We'll do a test. I'll go over here and then you whistle." Marcia strode across the room to the stairs. "Okay?"

Tod blew her whistle. No sound came out, but Marcia's whistle sounded, thin and sweet on the other side of the room. Marcia smiled. "I won't be long." And with that, she was gone.

Tod listened to the tippy-tappy sounds of the purple python shoes disappearing downward. She leaned back in the sun, the silver whistle warm in her hand, contentedly watching the activity that always accompanies a boat returning to her home port.

Marcia **UnSealed** Way VII and headed off to the Wizard Tower to speak to Septimus. But she arrived too late. He was already gone. Finding Dandra still occupied in the Sick Bay, Marcia settled down in the Great Hall to await Septimus's return.

Septimus was at Bott's Cloaks with Beetle, Chief Hermetic Scribe and unsuccessful remover of Grula-Grulas. It was Beetle's second day at Bott's Cloaks but this time he had with him an unusual display of force: the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, accompanied by his twin brothers, Senior Apprentices Edd and Erik Heap.

They were met by Miranda Bott—a large, irritable woman who had recently inherited the shop. Although Miranda dutifully continued the family business of selling **Magykal** cloaks (both *preloved* and *soon-to-be cherished*) she was not very welcoming toward Wizards.

The previous day with Beetle had not been a success—the Grula-Grula had thrown a spectacular temper tantrum and had ruined the last of Miranda's precious ancient cloaks. Finally, with her business in tatters and the stink of old cheese filling the shop, Miranda had agreed to allow the Wizard Tower to be involved. "I'm not having any old Wizard, mind," she had told Beetle. "You can bring the ExtraOrdinary or forget it."

Miranda sniffed disdainfully at the sight of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard in his impressive purple accompanied by what she took to be two bodyguards. Edd and Erik Heap were powerfully built and had a wild air about them, gained from years of living in the Forest. Miranda wasn't keen. "You can leave *them* outside," she said.

There was no way Septimus was going to leave Edd and Erik outside, but since becoming ExtraOrdinary Wizard he had learned a lot about the art of diplomacy. "Miss Bott," he said, "I would so much like you to meet my brothers Edd and Erik Heap."

"How do you do, Miss Bott," Edd and Erik murmured politely.

"Humph," harrumphed Miranda.

"And of course, you have already met the Chief Hermetic Scribe, Mr. Beetle."

Miranda Bott was not to be mollified. "Of course I've bloomin' met him. He practically moved in here yesterday. Fat lot of good he was too. I hope you are going to do better, ExtraOrdinary."

"We work as a team," Septimus said smoothly. "The Chief Hermetic Scribe performed stage one of the removal yesterday and all went as planned."

Beetle quickly mastered his look of surprise. Sometimes the new, ExtraOrdinary Wizard Septimus took him aback. His old friend had turned out to be a natural politician.

Miranda Bott was less impressed. “Rubbish!” she declared.

“So now, Miss Bott,” Septimus was saying, “in stage two we *all* need to attend to your uninvited guest. And I promise we shall do our very best.”

The sincere expression in Septimus’s clear green eyes and his calm manner began to soothe Miranda Bott’s frazzled temper. So Miranda smiled and said, “Thank you, ExtraOrdinary, I do believe you *will* do your best. Please come in.”

The Grula-Grula removal party stepped inside and Miranda bolted the door behind them. The smell was atrocious. Even Erik and Edd, who were used to Forest smells, wrinkled their noses in disgust.

“It’s the most revolting creature I’ve ever set eyes on,” Miranda declared. “Its personal hygiene is nonexistent. Follow me, please.” She set off through the shop, past tables sporting piles of neatly folded cloaks of various shades of blue and green. The increasingly queasy group followed Miranda through a succession of interconnecting rooms full of the more expensive cloaks—a forest of green, blue and the very occasional purple hanging neatly on rails suspended from the ceiling.

They emerged from behind the last of the cloaks to find Miranda Bott standing in front of a door marked *Ancient Archive*. “It’s in there,” she told them. “It’s *ruined* them. All those beautiful exhibit pieces—destroyed.” She sniffed dramatically and Beetle wondered how she managed to breathe in so deeply.

“At least there is no other harm done,” Septimus said. “Remind me, Miss Bott, what form has it taken today?”

“Today?” Miranda sounded flummoxed. “I dunno, I haven’t looked. It was a lovely, polite gentleman when it came in. Spent ages trying on all the most interesting cloaks, and he was charming. He even gave me back a five-crown note he found in one of the pockets.” She sighed. “You don’t get many customers like that.”

“Fortunately not,” said Septimus briskly, sounding, he thought to himself, rather like Marcia.

“So, when he asked to look at the Ancient Archive I thought that, what with him being such an honest gentleman, I could trust him. I let him in and then a customer came in the shop and I had to go and see to them. And then . . .” She gave a shudder. “And then, when I came back, I popped my head around the door all friendly-like, to see how he was getting on, and there was this great orange hairy blob squatting on a pile of the most valuable

cloaks. I must have screamed—well, actually, I know I screamed, because my neighbor came around and banged on the door to see if I was all right.”

“Why didn’t you come and tell us at the Wizard Tower straightaway?” Septimus asked.

“Well, I was so shocked I couldn’t believe it,” said Miranda. “So I counted to ten and looked back inside again, and there was no sign of the blob. I thought I’d imagined it.”

“The Grula-Grula had **ShapeShifted** into something else,” Septimus said. “Probably a mouse or something you wouldn’t notice.”

“Are you suggesting I am infested with mice?” Miranda demanded.

“Not you personally, Miss Bott,” Septimus replied. “Now, as I am sure you know, there are two ways of getting rid of a Grula-Grula visitation. The first is a little radical and may well lead to some peripheral impairment.”

“What?” asked Miranda.

“There may be some damage to the surroundings,” explained Septimus.

“I’ve had enough damage to my surroundings already, thank you very much,” Miranda said indignantly.

“So I suggest the second option, which is to persuade the Grula-Grula to exit of its own volition.”

“Of its own what?”

“Leave because it wants to,” Septimus said.

Miranda Bott looked exasperated. “But it doesn’t want to, does it? That is the problem.”

“Have you asked it?” Septimus inquired.

“No, of course I haven’t bloomin’ *asked* it. It’s a great fat smelly monster and it’s been sitting there pooing over all my most valuable cloaks for days. Why would I want to go and *talk* to it, eh? Sheesh!” Miranda Bott treated Beetle to a conspiratorial look of exasperation, but Beetle did not respond. He was not to be won over.

“So I suggest we ask it,” said Septimus. “Nicely.” He took a small piece of paper from his pocket and quickly scanned it, making sure he still knew every line. The Grula-Grula sonnet was only effective if proclaimed without breaking eye contact with the creature. “The Chief Hermetic Scribe and I are going in with the sonnet,” Septimus said. “I expect to be out with the Grula in two to three minutes. Please make sure we have a clear exit, Miss Bott.”

Septimus pushed open the door to the Ancient Archive and stepped inside with Beetle, leaving Edd and Erik on guard. A ten-foot-tall, roughly triangular mass of orange fur with no clear features—apart from what could possibly be two pink eyes at the top point of the triangle—sat in the middle of what was now a virtually empty room. It appeared to have eaten most of the cloaks and furniture and had begun on the walls, where it was, in some places, through to the brick. Taking care not to slip on the slime that pooled across the floor, Septimus and Beetle approached it warily.

The creature watched them equally warily. It recalled its mother telling it that it must never look at anything purple, but it couldn't remember why. And then, as soon as Septimus made eye contact with the two pink, watery circles at the top of its pointy head, it did remember—but too late. The Grula-Grula let out a high-pitched wail of dismay. Septimus launched into the sonnet at once.

*“What, O Grula, is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you, fair Grula, tend?”*

The Grula-Grula was successfully **Transfixed**. It stared at Septimus as in a low, steady voice, he spoke the Grula Sonnet. From somewhere underneath its fur, two little pink hands emerged and clasped together in utter delight. As Septimus drew toward the end, the Grula-Grula began to join in, singing softly in an ear-achingly high-pitched voice.

*“And, O Grula, you in every blessed shape we know.
In all external Grula-grace you have some part,
But, fair Grula, you like none, none you, for constant heart.”*

Beetle watched in amazement as the creature gazed down at Septimus in adoration. Its little hands wandered up to the point of its head and scraped its greasy hair into a neat parting, revealing a small, flushed face like a tiny pink plate.

Septimus bowed and said, “Fair Grula, come with me, I pray,” and when he began to walk toward the door, Beetle had to step smartly out of the way to avoid being mown down by a ton of ecstatic orange fur. They emerged into the sunlight and sweet air of Wizard Way, leaving Miranda Bott to

clean up the mess. Septimus stole a quick glance up at the sky to see if Spit Fyre had returned—as he was getting into the habit of doing every time he went outside. But the sky was both cloudless and dragonless.

Slowly, for the Grula-Grula took very tiny steps, they made their way back to the Wizard Tower, to the delight of many onlookers. “What are you going to do with it now?” Beetle asked.

“Stranger Chamber,” said Septimus. And then, in case the Grula was listening, he added, “Only the best for our honored guest.” Septimus had long been fascinated by these creatures, which would very occasionally and inexplicably appear in the Castle. Hundreds of years had gone by since the previous confirmed sighting of a Grula-Grula (although recently there had been rumors of one seen drowned in the Moat) and Septimus was determined not to let this one go. Grula-Grulas were superb **ShapeShifters**, which fascinated Septimus. He wanted to find out more.

Flanked by its escort, the Grula-Grula made its entrance into the Wizard Tower courtyard in a manner that it found highly gratifying. The Wizard Tower was a hotbed of gossip and word had quickly spread. A large group of Wizards and Apprentices were now gathered at the top of the steps to watch the procession. The Grula-Grula was very impressed with its reception, especially when it stepped over the threshold to be greeted by the floor’s message: *WELCOME, FAIR GRULA, MOST LOVELY OF THEM ALL*. However, the Grula-Grula was less impressed when it was suddenly confronted by a figure in a multicolored cloak, wearing purple pointy shoes that smelled of snake.

“Goodness!” said the snake-shoed figure. “What is that *ghastly* thing?”

“Marcia,” snapped the Grula-Grula’s purple escort. “Please be quiet.”

Marcia was shocked at being spoken to like that. And then she remembered that she was no longer ExtraOrdinary Wizard, that she was only there because Septimus allowed her to be, and if she was not careful he might very well change his mind.

“It is an *honor* and a *privilege* to have such a *glorious* guest,” Septimus said very loudly, to make sure the Grula-Grula heard.

Marcia gave Septimus a look of astonishment. She saw the Grula-Grula’s little pink eyes peering out—somewhat shortsightedly—from its hair, which hung down like limp, greasy curtains, and the trail of molted fur it had left behind, sticking to the soft, sandlike multicolored floor of the Great Hall. She watched the ten-foot-tall hairy triangle being escorted into

the Stranger Chamber, saw the Grula-Grula take one look at the deceptively beautiful room—and begin a slow, impressive **ShapeShift**.

A murmur of appreciation spread through the Wizards who had gathered to watch. The great bulk of fur and flesh began to shimmer and its boundaries grew indistinct. A fuzz of **Magyk** settled over the creature, there was a loud *whoosh* and the audience jumped back in surprise. In front of them stood a small, neat man in a dark suit. He wore a pair of thick, round spectacles through which peered tiny pink piggy eyes, and his pale-orange greasy hair was parted in the middle. He bowed, turned smartly on his heel and entered the Stranger Chamber.

Marcia waited while Septimus dealt with the usual problems and queries that were always thrown at an ExtraOrdinary Wizard whenever he or she ventured into the Great Hall. When at last people had drifted away, she pounced. “Septimus!”

Septimus looked weary. “Marcia,” he said unenthusiastically.

Marcia felt sorry for him. She remembered how many times as ExtraOrdinary Wizard she had longed to be *left alone*. But this could not wait. “Septimus, I am so sorry.”

The expression of weariness in Septimus’s eyes was replaced by shock—what was wrong? Marcia never apologized. But before he could ask what had happened, Marcia had launched into a rapid gabble.

“Septimus, you were right,” she was saying.

Septimus looked stunned. “Me? Right?” he said. “About what?”

Marcia sighed. “I’m sure Dandra has told you what happened last night.”

“Dandra? Haven’t seen her. The Sick Bay’s frantic, apparently.” Septimus looked at his timepiece. “Look, Marcia, I really must get on. I have an Apprentice Rotation Scheme meeting in a few minutes.”

“So you haven’t heard?” Marcia said.

“About what?”

“Oh, Septimus. I am so sorry. There was an Incursion. We *must* talk—oh!” A thin, high piping suddenly came from the silver whistle around Marcia’s neck. “Oh, goodness!” She put her hand on Septimus’s arm. “I have to go. Something’s wrong. Septimus, come with me. *Please*.”

Septimus knew when Marcia was serious. He left a hasty message with the door duty Wizard and hurried after Marcia as she raced down the steps. He caught up with her outside Way VII, which to his surprise he could

actually see. And then he realized why. Racing out of its misty depths was a familiar, slight figure. And as Tod hurtled into the bright morning sunshine, Septimus saw that she had snow on her shoes.

“Blizzard!” Tod gasped. “Horse! Mad girl! Hurry!”

SNOW GLOBE

Tod, Septimus and Marcia ran out of Way VII into the Hub and found themselves in a snowstorm. They stumbled forward, half deafened by a tumult of terrified whinnying and piercing shrieks, and suddenly Marcia found herself nose to nose with a set of tombstone horse teeth. Marcia leaped back, the horse reared up and Septimus lunged for the bridle and grabbed it. Through the blizzard he caught the shimmer of sparkling blue reins and a white, shining figure seated on the horse.

A sudden shout filled the Hub. “Garmin! Garmin!” yelled Tod.

Septimus spun around and briefly, through the blizzard he saw the unmistakable shape of a Garmin come leaping into the Hub. He saw it stop and crouch down, confused by the swirling snow, and he saw another spring from an arch and join it—then another. A cloud of snow whirled in front of his eyes and Septimus could see no more.

He did the only thing he could. Trusting Marcia’s quick reactions, Septimus threw up his arms and yelled, “**Freezer!**” A rush of white crystals tinged with purple streamed from his open palms, swirled around horse and rider and then spiraled out into the rest of the Hub, popping and snapping as they went.

Inside the blizzard, Marcia heard Septimus’s **Freezer**. She grabbed hold of Tod, held on to her tight and began muttering the **AntiFreeze**. Tod saw the crackling tide of ice rolling toward her, she felt coldness surround her and then the **AntiFreeze** kicked in. A rush of warmth spread through her and the crystal wave rolled harmlessly by.

With the **Freezing** of the horse and rider, the snow began to subside. Across the Hub Tod saw the three Garmin, almost invisible, white against the snow. At the same time, they saw her. There was a long, seemingly endless moment when the Garmin launched themselves toward her and then the river of ice engulfed the creatures and they were frozen in midleap. One immediately toppled over. There was the sound of shattering, tinkling glass as it broke into thousands of sparkling crystalline shards, shining like

diamonds in the light of the Hub torches. Another Garmin was held upright by one back leg welded into the ice that covered the snow. But as they watched, the ice gave way under the weight of the creature above and the second Garmin fell in another shower of crystals. The third lay **Frozen**, crouched as if to pounce.

“Stop Freezer!” Septimus’s command echoed around the Hub. He dropped his hands to his side, the light from his palms faded and the crystal wave—which was now heading around the Hub for a second circuit—stopped.

“Goodness, Septimus—that was a bit dramatic,” Marcia said, raising her voice above the background crackle of settling ice.

“But necessary,” Septimus replied.

“Oh, yes. Totally,” Marcia said hurriedly, not wanting Septimus to think she was criticizing. A **Freezer** was a rapid-reflex spell—indiscriminate but very effective, it was the kind of spell that was looked down upon by purists. But Marcia was no purist. She knew that when more than one danger must be disabled at once, such a spell was an essential tool. However, like all quick fixes, a **Freezer** has disadvantages—it **Freezes** every living thing in its path and can be dangerous to those who are **Frozen**.

The fizzing and snapping of ice crystals was fading now to a few isolated pops. Tod, Septimus and Marcia stood knee-deep in frozen snow, staring at the bizarre tableau surrounding them.

Tod had once owned a snow globe—a transparent dome filled with fluid in which there was a snowy scene. When she shook the globe, white flakes had swirled up through the fluid to create a snowstorm, which then slowly subsided. Right now Tod felt as though she were inside a big, bizarre snow globe. Captivated, she watched the snow gently subside around the **Frozen** shape of a huge white horse rearing up, its hooves pawing the air and its rider leaning back, trying to stay seated. The rider was striking—a girl not so many years older than she, dressed in a white fur jacket and thick white woolen pantaloons. What struck Tod was her pure white hair, which was braided into scores of thin plaits tied into a horse’s tail that hung down her back, all interlaced with blue ribbons that shimmered with ice. The girl’s blue eyes were wide open in terror as she stared sightlessly through the film of ice that had **Frozen** her and her horse.

Marcia left Septimus working out how to **DeFrost** the horse and rider and waded through the snow to Way XI, where the useless **Seal** was

hanging from the archway like a mist of shredded paper. She gathered the remnants of the **Seal** in her hands, held them close to her face and caught echoes of a wild, untutored **Magyk** and some powerful emotions—fear and anger. Marcia replaced the **Seal**, and this time she added more than a touch of **Darke Magyk**. One of the advantages to no longer being ExtraOrdinary Wizard was that Marcia could now use the **Darke** without compromising the pure **Magyk** of the Wizard Tower.

On her way back to join Septimus and Tod, Marcia aimed a precise, pointy kick at the third Garmin.

Tod watched the Garmin shatter into a thousand shards of ice and she suddenly remembered something. Her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh! The Drummins! They were here. That’s what I heard first—the Drummins shouting. Then the horse neighing. Oh no . . . are they **Frozen** too?”

Marcia stopped dead. “Yes,” she said. “They will be.”

Anxiously, Marcia surveyed the snow. “I think there’s one here,” she said, kneeling beside a Drummin-shaped bump. Gingerly she broke through the ice crust on top of the snow and had soon revealed a plaited Drummin beard, ice-hard and glistening white.

“Is it easy to melt things?” Tod asked in a whisper, afraid that any loud sound might make the Drummin fall into a thousand shards of ice, just as the Garmin had.

“Ah, you mean **DeFrost**,” Septimus said. “Well, it is relatively easy to do a **DeFrost**, but it is not so easy to do a safe one. **DeFrosting** can be very dangerous for the **Frozen**. However, it is possible to make it safer by using the person’s name. Who is this one, Marcia?”

Very gently brushing the snow off the Drummin, Marcia revealed a pair of gingery eyebrows. “It’s Fabius,” she said. “Hmm . . . this is tricky, Septimus. He’s **Frozen** midstride . . . standing on only one leg. Horribly easy to knock him over.”

Septimus squatted down beside Marcia. He placed both hands on Fabius to steady him and whispered, “Fabius Drummin. **DeFrost**.”

Tod saw a warm, reddish glow emanating from Septimus’s hands. She could feel the **Magykal** heat in the air as a thin stream of orangey-red mist wrapped itself around Fabius. There was a faint, crackling whisper, like ice on a frozen pond when the sun begins to shine upon it, then Fabius groaned and fell over into the snow. Tod waited for the awful sound of Fabius splintering.

“You can open your eyes, Tod,” Septimus said with a smile in his voice. “See the puddle of water beneath him? He’s **DeFrosted**.”

Fabius Drummin groaned and began to shiver. “I’ll take him upstairs to the Fire Pit,” Tod offered.

“Good thinking,” said Septimus, eyeing a nearby Drummin-shaped mound. “And with any luck, there’ll be another one in a minute.”

Three **DeFrosted** Drummins were sitting by their kitchen fire wrapped in blankets when Tod hurried back down to the Hub to watch the **DeFrosting** of the horse and rider. She found Septimus and Marcia silently sizing up the problem. Tod could tell that this was going to be tough. Septimus must **DeFrost** both at once, because not only was the horse very delicately balanced on its back legs but the rider looked as though she were about to fall off. And once they were **DeFrosted** Septimus would have to jump out of the way *fast*.

Tod waded through the slush and joined the two Wizards, who were looking thoughtfully up at their project. Suddenly Septimus said, “It’s *her*. It must be.”

“It’s *who*?” asked Marcia.

“The Snow Princess that Jenna and I took all the way home in the Dragon Boat in the summer. The one that Jen still moans about whenever I see her.”

Marcia had heard about this from her new stepdaughter. “Oh, *that* Snow Princess,” she said with a smile. “How bizarre.”

“Yes, it is.” Septimus frowned up at the rider, trying to make out her features beneath their glaze of ice.

“You are sure it is her?” Marcia asked. “Because if we use the wrong name . . .”

“I know, I know,” Septimus said snappily. “It’s even more dangerous with the wrong name. I am ninety-nine percent sure.” He turned to Marcia. “It’s a risk worth taking.”

“It’s your call, Septimus,” said Marcia.

“Yes. I know. I shall use her name. It *is* her. There’s something about the expression—kind of annoyed, but charming even so . . . We’ll do this together?”

Marcia nodded.

Septimus placed his hands on the horse’s raised hooves. Marcia placed hers on the rider’s back to stop her from falling off. Fascinated, Tod

watched the two Wizards unfocus their eyes and go somewhere deep inside themselves. In complete synchronization, she saw them take a long, deep breath in and then slowly let it out. She saw a warm glow spread from their hands, spreading across the ice, melting it as it went, revealing the damp fur of the rider's jacket, the horn of the horse's hooves. The melt spread fast, the ice crackled and began to fall, then suddenly the white-haired girl tumbled from the horse and landed with a *splat* in the slush below. In a moment she was on her feet. She spun around, saw Marcia staring at her in surprise and snatched a short, shimmering blue stick from a holster on her belt.

Septimus could do nothing—he was still deep in **Magyk, DeFrosting** the horse.

“Haii, Magus! Haii, haii!” the girl yelled, advancing on Marcia, stabbing the stick forward like a dagger. Marcia retreated but the stick jabbed her in the shoulder. There was a *hissssss*, a smell of burning wool and she went staggering backward. Marcia was unwilling to use **Magyk** on someone so recently **DeFrosted**. Hands up, Marcia backed away. “Denna!” she said soothingly. “Denna, Driffa. *Denna*.”

Surprised to hear her own name and language spoken, the girl stopped and stared at Marcia. Taking advantage of the lull, Tod waded in and grabbed the stick. To her shock it was red-hot. She threw it down, sending it sizzling into the watery slush. Princess Driffa was not pleased. She snatched up her stick, and yelling, “Haii! Haii!” she advanced this time on Tod, stabbing the red-tipped stick at her face. Tod ducked and hurled herself at Driffa's white boots. It was a fine tackle. At the precise moment that Princess Driffa crashed face-first into a pile of slush, Septimus finished **DeFrosting** her horse. A wild neigh filled the Hub, two great hooves thudded down to the ground and everyone was covered in gritty, ice-cold water.

A sudden exclamation came from the foot of the stairs. “What the—?” Milo Banda gazed at the inexplicable scene in front of him. “Marcia,” he protested. “I can't leave you alone for five minutes.”

SNOW PRINCESS DRIFFA, THE MOST HIGH AND BOUNTIFUL

Up in the big hall of the Keep, in front of the blazing fire, Princess Driffa sat wrapped in blankets. She was shivering uncontrollably—a delayed effect of the **Freezer**. Her translucent white skin had a blue tinge to it and her bright blue eyes were the only natural color she had. Her blue ribbons laced through her white braided hair hung limp and wet, and her sparkling blue fingernails peeped out from the blankets as she clutched them to her.

Driffa's presence took Marcia right back to being a child. As the daughter of traveling Wizards, Marcia had spent a few years in the Eastern SnowPlains as guests of three princesses who had looked remarkably similar.

Tod looked admiringly at Driffa. She had never seen anyone quite so blue and white before. And now that she knew that Driffa had spent two whole days on the Dragon Boat, she was impressed. She handed Driffa a mug of hot chocolate. "I'm sorry I knocked you over," she said.

Princess Driffa said nothing. She had not gotten over the affront to her dignity. She sniffed the hot chocolate suspiciously.

"Drink it," said Septimus. "It will warm you up."

Driffa gave Septimus a wan smile and took a sip of the chocolate. It tasted good. The hot drink did its work and soon Driffa's shivering had subsided.

Remembering the formality of the Eastern SnowPlains, Marcia said, "Welcome, Snow Princess of the Eastern Plains. I am Marcia Overstrand, and you are an honored guest in my house. May you be so for many days yet to come."

Princess Driffa understood formality. She inclined her head in a brief nod and said, "I, Snow Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful, thank you, O wise Sorcerer." Then she looked at Septimus, who had not, Marcia

noticed, taken his eyes off Driffa. “ExtraOrdinary Wizard Septimus Heap. I thank you for freeing my horse from its foul **Enchantment**.”

Feeling a little awkward, Septimus bowed his head in acknowledgment. Clearly Driffa did not realize that it was *his* foul **Enchantment** that had **Frozen** her horse—and he wasn’t about to tell her, either.

Haughtily, Driffa handed her empty cup to Tod. Then she turned to Marcia and said, “I pray you, send the servant boy away. There are important matters I wish to discuss.”

Marcia looked puzzled. She didn’t have a servant boy. But Tod understood.

“I am not a boy,” she told Driffa indignantly. “And I am not a servant, either.”

“Ah.” Marcia felt bad. She realized she should have introduced Tod properly. She hurried to make amends. “Snow Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful, may I present to you Alice TodHunter Moon. She, too, is an honored guest in my house.”

Driffa inclined her head very slightly in Tod’s direction and looked away again. Tod thought she was extremely rude. She sat hugging her knees, feeling chilled and alone. A longing to be home, where she needed no introduction to anyone, came over her. Tod picked up her own mug of hot chocolate and stared into it stonily. She was not going to cry. *She was not.*

While Tod retreated into her own head, the Snow Princess—her thin white hands with their shimmering blue nails fluttering like bird wings—began to speak. At first Tod paid little attention, but as the story unfolded, she found herself listening with increasing interest.

“I, Driffa, am the daughter of the High Emperor of the Great Eastern SnowPlains. We live in the low hills that surround the largest of the SnowPlains. Our people trade and work the precious blue stone, which we take from our **Enchanted** Blue Pinnacle.”

A smile flitted across Marcia’s face. She remembered moonlit sleigh rides out to the mysterious tall, conical hill of lapis lazuli, always free of snow, in the middle of a vast plain of white.

Driffa held out her hands to show bracelets made of silver and glittering stones of blue and a ring with a piece of polished lapis as big as Tod’s paint-splashed pebble. “This is the stone that the Great Orm has given to us in return for guarding its precious Egg. We are peaceful people. Our pleasure

is to build snow towers and polish stones. Our duty is to guard the Egg of the Orm.” The Princess bit her lip and her voice trembled. “Which . . . we have failed to do.”

Tod looked up. *So the Snow Princess is human after all*, she thought.

Driffa continued. “The Egg of the Orm gives us the **Enchantment** that covers our lands with beautiful snow throughout the year and allows us to live in towers of ice. Far beneath the Blue Pinnacle is the Chamber of the Egg of the Orm. In the middle of this chamber is the Orm Tube, and at the bottom of the Orm Tube lies the Egg. The Chamber of the Egg of the Orm is a hallowed place, full of silence and sleep. Around it is the Sacred Ice Walk, where we go to contemplate the Egg and give thanks for its **Enchantment**. Or we did.” The Snow Princess blinked back tears. She got out a white handkerchief and blew her nose loudly. “But now . . .” she said angrily. “Now all is desecrated. By a fiend called Oraton-Marr.”

Tod looked at Driffa with some sympathy. It seemed that the Snow Princess had lost her village too.

Driffa continued. “In our family there is a Time Traveler. She is my great-great-great-grandmother. On my sixteenth birthday I opened a letter from her. It was an invitation to meet her in the House of Foryx.”

Marcia gasped.

“You know this place, O Sorcerer?” asked the Snow Princess.

“I do,” said Marcia. “It is not somewhere I would invite a granddaughter to.”

“I understand what you say, but I did not know what it was then. I thought it was the house where my many-times-great-grandmother lived. When I arrived I found her sitting in the checkered lobby on a chair carved like a dragon. She recognized me at once, but I would never have known her. She was young, no more than ten years older than I am. She took me to her little room high up in one of the octagonal towers and she told me a terrible thing. She said that an evil sorcerer was coming to take away the Egg of the Orm. I asked her how she knew and she said she had seen it.”

“If this has happened,” Septimus said, “it cannot be changed.”

The Princess looked miserable. “That is what I thought too. I asked her why she was taunting me with such terrible news, but all she would say was that some things could be prevented. She did not say what they were. She said it was important for me to do this because we live at the center of the world, where all roads meet and the evil must not travel further. I laughed at

her because we live in a dead end. There is but one pass through the hills that leads into our SnowPlain and we see few travelers. Those who come are usually lost. They walk around the foothills looking for a way through to the other side but there is none. We are hospitable people and we offer them shelter and good food and guide them back the way they came. It is hardly the center of the world.

“My grandmother became cross with me for laughing. She told me to leave. I must wait in the dragon chair for a handsome, young ExtraOrdinary Wizard—she described him very well—wearing new robes and carrying a **Magykal** black stone. I must Go Out with him because that would be the right Time. What I did not know was that the right Time for my great-great-great-grandmother was not the right Time for me. When I returned home, my three younger sisters were old women, my parents were dead and our towers of ice were deserted. Almost everyone had run away.

“And Oraton-Marr was already there. My sisters—who, being princesses, were brave and had not run away—had watched the sorcerer arrive. He did not walk the foothills, looking for a way out as others do, he went straight across the plain to our **Enchanted** Blue Pinnacle and he set up camp. He took the snow and made it into Iglopuks—big, round houses—leaving the earth bare.” She turned around to Tod and Marcia, smiling. “When we are children we do this. We make a snow house, which is fun, and from where we have taken the snow, the rock is bare. Then we watch the **Enchantment** bringing the snow back. That is even more fun, to see the snow return.” She shook her head sadly. “But the snow did not return and my sisters became anxious, because they knew this must mean the sorcerer was destroying our **Enchantment**.

“My sisters sent our most powerful sorcerer to ask the **Darke** one to leave, but she did not return. They sent the second most powerful sorcerer and he did not return either. The third most powerful sorcerer pleaded not to be sent, and my sisters told me that there seemed little point in losing him, despite the fact they all found him very annoying. They wished they had sent him first.

“There was nothing my sisters could do but watch. They saw Oraton-Marr dig down into the ice beside our Blue Pinnacle. After some months, they said, people began to appear, although no one saw them come. It was very strange. But these wretched, enslaved people were set to work.

“Heaps of black earth and filthy ice began to pile up fast and we knew that soon Oraton-Marr would reach our sacred Chamber of the Egg of the Orm. I had to do something—a princess cannot spend all her life in her tower of ice counting her blue stones. And so early this morning before it was light, I took my best horse, the fair Nona, and I set off to challenge the foul sorcerer.

“I have some snow **Magyk**—enough to make stupid people think that I am nothing more than a gust of snow. I knew it would not fool Oraton-Marr but I thought it would allow me to get past his guards and get close to him. The **Enchantment** covered Nona’s tracks with fresh snow and we made no sound, but as we drew near, the sorcerer’s influence came into being, the **Enchantment** weakened and Nona’s tracks began to show. But we reached the bare earth unseen and with my small **Magyk**, we moved across the spoil like a gust of Akkilokipok—the soft snow with fat flakes that settles fast. This makes a better disguise than Kanevvluk, the small, sharp snow, which is colder and gives less cover.

“From within our tiny blizzard Nona and I saw that a great pit was being dug down into the ground, toward the Chamber of the Egg of the Orm. Guards with spikes on their heads marched around the top of the pit, each with a Garmin on a leash. Nona and I saw hundreds of people working. Some were pushing barrows of earth up steep paths that led out of the pit. Others were hacking at the rock and ice below. All kinds of people were there; even little children were working and all were dirty, cold and utterly wretched. It was a terrible sight.

“There was a path into the pit that was not being used by the workers and I decided to take a closer look. The path descended, circling deep inside the walls around the pit. Nona is a good horse; she bravely went down the path into the darkness of the rock. Suddenly we came upon Oraton-Marr. I challenged him and asked him what he was doing. He laughed and said that he was ‘egg collecting.’” Driffa looked disgusted. “He said it with no respect—as though our precious Egg of the Orm were a chicken egg. I pretended not to know what he meant. I told him there was nothing here for him and he should go away and let his poor slaves go free. But he set his guards on us and I am ashamed to say Nona and I fled. Our way back up was blocked by guards by then, so we had no choice but to go down. We found ourselves descending through a circular tunnel of lapis covered in ice, I expected that soon we would be caught, but I was not going to make it

easy for them. And then, to my amazement, Nona cantered into the most wonderful place I have ever seen. A huge blue chamber lit with torches with twelve silver arches and a great spiral of blue for the roof.”

She was interrupted by a gasp. “The Heart of the Ways,” Marcia whispered. “It *must* be.”

“No,” said Driffa. “It is the long-lost Chamber of the Great Orm itself. This was where the Great Orm came to die after it had laid its last egg—our Egg. But I had no time to look. There were guards in the Chamber waiting at an archway, so Nona and I cantered into the nearest arch and found ourselves in the strangest of places.”

“Did the sorcerer follow you?” Marcia asked.

“No, but three of his Garmin did. Nona and I traveled through many strange places. Some were hot, some were cold; in some it was nighttime, in others it was day, but always there were twelve arches and always there were Garmin behind us. Nona was fast and brave. She outran them—until we came here, where she cast a shoe. Then I used a blizzard to try to conceal us from the Garmin—and your three fierce creatures with knives.”

“I am sorry,” said Marcia. “The Drummings meant no harm.”

“I understand,” said Driffa. She looked at Marcia. “I meant no harm to you, either, but I saw you were a sorcerer. Indeed, you look a little like him.”

“I *do*?”

“A little. You are taller, and your hair is longer. But the green eyes are the same. And the purple pointy shoes made of snake.”

Marcia was aghast. “He has shoes like mine? Well, that does it, we’ll have to get rid of him.” She smiled at Tod. “Only one of us can wear these shoes. And that is *me*.”

NONA

It was late. Septimus had returned to the Wizard Tower, the Drummins were asleep in the Fire Pit, and down in the Hub Milo was noisily busy with a bucket and a shovel.

A bright purple light emanating from the **Seals** suffused the Hub. It looked very pretty, Milo thought, but it did not make it easy to search for horse poo. Milo had just found what he hoped was the last shovelful at the foot of the stairs when he heard the *tippy-tap-tap* of Marcia's pointy purple pythons. The pythons were, he could tell, in a hurry.

Marcia rounded the last twist of the spiral stairs, her multicolored cloak flying behind her, and ran straight into Milo. "Goodness, Milo, what *are* you doing?" she asked.

"Avoiding the curse of the silent footstep."

"The curse of the silent footstep?" Marcia sounded puzzled, and then a waft of horse dung drifted up to her nose. "Oh, Milo, *thank you*," she said.

Milo put down his bucket and leaned his shovel against the wall. He looked serious. "Marcia, I know we agreed not to interfere with each other's work, but please tell me—what on earth is going on?"

Marcia took Milo's hands. "Milo, Tod and I are going to take the Snow Princess to the Wizard Tower. Septimus wants to understand who this sorcerer, Oraton-Marr, is. He's gone to look a few things up and talk to the older Wizards. I promised we'd follow on."

Milo sighed. "Does this really matter, Marcia? All this stuff is happening on the other side of the world. Why should it bother *us*?"

"Because, Milo, any moment Oraton-Marr could turn up here." Marcia looked anxiously around at the **Seals**.

Milo had great faith in Marcia's **Magyk** abilities. "But you've **Sealed** it all. And I'm not stupid, Marcia. I know you added a whole *ton* of **Darke** stuff. Nothing can get through those now."

Marcia shook her head. "No **Magyk** lasts forever, Milo. And no **Magyk** is infallible. If Oraton-Marr becomes as powerful as he clearly is

determined to be, he will, if he wishes, eventually be standing here, where we are right now. *In this Hub*. And then all he will have to do is take a short stroll into Way Seven and he will be in the Wizard Tower. We *have* to stop that from happening.”

Milo was not convinced. “Marcia, you worry too much. This sorcerer chap sounds bonkers to me. He’s obsessed with some mythical egg. Soon enough he’ll find his precious egg doesn’t exist, and he will give up and go somewhere else. I can’t see him bothering to come here. Why would he?”

Marcia smiled. “To get to the most powerful seat of **Magyk** in the whole world maybe?” She shook her head. “Anyway, Milo, I think it’s possible that this Egg *does* exist. Marwick used to tell me about the legend of the Orm. It was a giant worm, he said, that created the Ancient Ways. It ate through the rock, leaving lapis lazuli behind.”

Milo laughed. “Young Marwick always had a few good stories to tell. Better than mine sometimes, I have to admit. But it doesn’t mean they are true.”

“And it doesn’t mean they *aren’t* true,” Marcia countered. Her hand closed over the silver whistle she wore around her neck. Not so long ago, in its place Marcia had worn the Akhu Amulet. This amulet, a **Magykal** source of power for all ExtraOrdinary Wizards, was made from lapis that—legend had it—came from the belly of the Orm.

Marcia wandered over to Way VII—the one that led to the Wizard Tower. From a space between two stones, she pulled out a tiny piece of pale blue lapis and gave it Milo. “See? It’s sprinkled everywhere. And there is *much* more of it inside a Way. Little bits of lapis folded into the stone. It is very strange.”

Milo scraped up the last of the horse poo and set the lid on the bucket with a clang. “Hmm,” he said. “But even if there *were* an egg, why would this sorcerer want it?”

Marcia knew exactly why. “For the lapis lazuli. It concentrates **Magyk** like nothing else. The Wizard Tower sits on a huge chunk of the stuff. And think of the Dragon House; that’s lined with it. Not to mention the labyrinth that goes to the Great Chamber of Alchemie. That’s why the Castle is such a **Magykal** place. With enough lapis even minor **Magyk** can grow powerful. With the right conditions an Orm Egg would hatch and pretty soon the young Orm would begin creating enough lapis lazuli to make even

a mediocre Wizard a force to be reckoned with. Not to mention a reasonably powerful **Darke** one.” Marcia shuddered. “It doesn’t bear thinking about.”

Milo sighed. “I suppose not.”

There was the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. “Ah, here they come,” said Marcia.

Tod and Driffa stepped into the Hub. Driffa squinted in the purple light, shielding her eyes with her hands. “You have powerful **Magyk**,” she said.

“I hope so,” replied Marcia solemnly. “Right, let’s get going.”

Milo picked up his bucket. “And what about the horse?” he asked.

The Snow Princess gazed at Milo with her big blue eyes. “Nona would like to stay with you,” she said.

“Nona?” asked Milo, a little too dreamily for Marcia’s liking. Clearly Milo thought that the Snow Princess was called Nona.

“The *horse*, Milo,” Marcia snapped.

“Of course it’s the horse,” said Milo, recovering himself. “Who—I mean, what—else could it be?”

Marcia raised her eyebrows. “Milo, I have no idea.” She looked at Driffa. “We’ll be off now—and see that handsome ExtraOrdinary Wizard of yours.”

Driffa blushed pink against the purple-white of her hair. “Oh, he is not mine,” she said. “Another Princess has him. A grumpy one with dark hair.”

Marcia was puzzled but said nothing. She reminded herself that Septimus’s personal life had nothing to do with her.

“Good-bye,” Milo said a little sadly. “Stay safe.”

“You too.” Marcia gave him a quick hug and then, linking arms with Tod and Driffa, strode into Way VII.

Bucket and shovel in hand, Milo watched the trio walk into the depths of the Way. He saw them step into the strange white mist and their dark shapes fade as they went through the **Vanishing Point**. And then they were gone.

Deep in the Way, Tod’s hand closed over her little blue lapis box. Inside it she felt the **PathFinder** tap-tap-tapping against the sides, as if it wanted to be set free.



PART VIII

OSKAR AND FERDIE

Earlier that day, while *Tod* had been wading through snow, Oskar had been kicking his way through ash.

Three nights had now passed since *Tod* had sailed away, and Oskar was beginning to realize that not only was *Tod* not coming back but he didn't even know where she had gone. The Wizard Tower could be anywhere in the world—all Oskar knew for sure was that it was somewhere across the sea. *Tod* had disappeared as completely as *Ferdie* had done. *But unlike Ferdie*, Oskar thought angrily, *Tod had wanted to*.

Oskar and *Ferdie* had been helping to clear the site of their old house, and now they were heading back to the place that was, for the moment, home. They were living with their elderly cousins, Marni and Dergal Sarn. Being a little way from the main village and almost hidden behind a dune, Marni and Dergal's house had escaped the blaze. No one wanted to stay in *Tod*'s old house, which was smashed to pieces inside and still smelled of Garmin.

Over a frugal meal, Marni once again tried to console *Ferdie*. “*Ferdie* love, your parents didn't want to go, but they had little *Torr* to think about. All the people with kids went.”

“But why did they trust this ‘wise woman?’” asked *Ferdie*. “They had no idea who she was.”

Marni shook her head. “Panic, I suppose. Many were facing a night out in the open and the thought of those awful Garmin coming back . . . Well, what would you do if someone—especially a big, motherly woman—offered to take you to safety? I would have done the same if I'd had a little one to think of.”

Ferdie frowned. “Marni, did you see this wise woman?” she asked.

Marni shook her head. She stuck out a heavily bandaged foot and glared at it. “I was stuck here with my stupid foot and, what with the house being hidden in this hollow in the dunes, I didn't see a thing, except the terrible

flames shooting up into the sky. But Dergal saw her. Dergal! Dergal!” Marni called.

Dergal Sarn’s head appeared at the top of the ladder. “All right?” he inquired.

“Dergal, you saw the woman come out of the Far, didn’t you?” Marni asked.

Dergal heaved himself up the rest of the ladder and plonked himself down in a chair. “Didn’t take to her myself,” he said.

“What did she look like?” Ferdie asked.

“Well . . .” Dergal, a slow-speaking man, considered the matter. “It was the strangest thing. I had to blink to make sure I hadn’t imagined it. I saw a light coming out of the Far and then the most bizarre woman emerged, carrying a lantern and looking like she didn’t have a care in the world. I mean, there was the village ablaze, flames shooting thirty feet in the air, but she didn’t look surprised at all. What really struck me was the smug little smile she had on her face. Not nice.” Dergal shook her head. “No, I didn’t take to her at all. Not one little bit.”

“But what did she look like?” Ferdie asked again.

“Well, she was a big lady, that’s for sure. And here’s a thing—she looked like she was off to a *very* fancy party. She was wearing a shiny, bright blue billowing dress, silk I would have said—and she had a piece of gold cloth wound all around her head. *Very fancy.*” Dergal sounded disapproving.

“Ferdie!” Marni cried out. “Ferdie, whatever is the matter?”

The color had drained from Ferdie’s face. She looked gray. “It’s her,” she whispered.

“Who, sweetheart?” asked Marni. “Dergal, go and get Ferdie some water, she looks terrible—oh, this *stupid* foot.”

“It’s the Lady,” Ferdie whispered. “From the ship. I was her prisoner. It’s *her!*”

Marni stared at Ferdie, shocked. “But . . . but it can’t be.”

“It is her,” Ferdie said. “I *know* it is.”

“No,” Marni said. “No. It must be some other woman in a party dress.”

“Marni,” Dergal said with an air of exasperation. “And just how many women do you suppose walk around the Far in a fancy blue party dress, eh?”

“There’s only one like that,” Ferdie said flatly. “She got me. And now she’s got Mum and Dad and little Torr.”

THIEVES IN THE NIGHT

That night Tod was back in the Junior Girls' Apprentice Dorm, sleeping peacefully. But far away across the sea, Oskar and Ferdie lay wide-awake. They were sharing a bedroom, just as they used to before Torr was born and, as ever, they were talking late into the night. But they were no longer whispering about Oskar's plans for what he called "contraptions" or Ferdie's ideas for a new kite. Now their conversation was serious—because Oskar and Ferdie had decided to track down the Lady.

When everyone had gone to bed, Ferdie crept downstairs. She put as much dried food as she felt was fair to take into her backpack, filled up the water bag and took two light sticks from the cupboard. Ferdie knew it was not good to be raiding Marni and Dergal's store cupboard. She felt like a thief in the night, but she hoped they would understand.

Meanwhile, Oskar was writing a letter, and finding it difficult. When Ferdie returned with the backpack he showed it to her.

*Dear Marni and Dergal and Jerra and Annar,
Ferdie and me are going into the Far to find Mum and Dad and Torr. And everyone. I know you will be worried, but we will be all right.*

Love from Oskar and

Ferdie looked at the letter. It was a typical Oskie letter, she thought, short and to the point, but she didn't think she could do any better. She signed her name beside his.

They slept for a few hours. Oskar woke just before dawn and shook Ferdie awake. In minutes they were easing open the outside door and climbing stealthily down the ladder. The first rays of the sun were creeping over the dunes as Oskar and Ferdie stepped into the Far.

Far away across the water, in the Wizard Tower, Tod slept on. At the foot of her bed, Dan's fishing vest was neatly folded. And under her pillow was her blue lapis box, where the **PathFinder**, like Tod, now slept. But unlike Tod, the **PathFinder** slept peacefully. It had no nightmares of dark forests and prison cells.

THE FAR

The early-morning sun shone through the pale green leaves of the beech trees as Oskar and Ferdie walked briskly along. It felt like the beginning of so many family picnics they had enjoyed over the years, and neither of them could quite believe that this expedition into the Far was going to be any different.

They had no trouble following the path that people had taken. Oskar was in his element. “Look, Ferd,” he said. “You can see all those snapped twigs, the leaves broken off and brushed onto the ground, the trodden grass. You can tell that *tons* of people have been this way. It will be easy to follow them.”

After a few hours of steady walking they reached the usual Sarn picnic spot—a bright clearing with a small stream bubbling through on its way to the sea. Oskar paced the clearing, looking for clues in the sunlight. He felt that if he looked carefully enough he would surely see traces of his parents and little brother. There were indeed signs of children—a few small footprints in the mud beside the stream—but nothing that could tell Oskar to whom they belonged. But as Oskar walked slowly along the stream he came across something that he did not want to see.

“*Ferd.*” The tension in Oskar’s voice had Ferdie running to his side.

“Oskie, what is it?”

“Come here.”

Ferdie peered at the patch of mud that Oskar was squatting beside. “What?” she asked anxiously.

“*Garmin.*”

“*Garmin?* But . . . but how can you tell?”

Oskar pointed to what looked like a huge, doglike paw print scuffed into the mud.

Ferdie didn’t want to believe it. “It could be any kind of animal, Oskie.”

Oskar shook his head. “No, Ferd. Look at this . . . See here? That’s the front paw. Like a monkey’s hand. See, where it’s leaned down to drink?” He

looked up at his sister. “It’s a Garmin, Ferd. There’s no way around it.”

Ferdie picked up a stone and hurled it angrily into the stream. “I hate her,” she said. “*I hate her.*”

Oskar knew exactly who Ferdie was talking about. “Yeah,” he said.

“Mum and Dad and Torr. They must have been so *scared.*”

“Yeah,” said Oskar.

Ferdie kicked the Garmin tracks in disgust. Then she looked up at Oskar and said, “We’re going to get her, Oskie. She’s going to regret she ever messed with us.”

“Yeah,” said Oskar. But he didn’t sound convinced.

They sat down miserably on the well-trodden grassy bank and Ferdie fished out two large biscuits, a handful of dried raisins and an apple. “Breakfast,” she said.

“Not hungry,” muttered Oskar.

“Oskie, *eat,*” Ferdie instructed. “We have to keep strong.”

They had lapsed into silence, picking at the raisins, when Ferdie said, “I wonder what Tod is doing right now?”

“Who cares?” Oskar said crossly. He picked up a small stone and hurled it into the stream. “But you can bet she won’t be thinking about us, that’s for sure.”

But right then, thinking about Ferdie and Oskar was precisely what Tod was doing. She was in a stuffy conference room in the Wizard Tower, listening to long and complex discussions about Ancient Ways. The meeting was slow, technical and full of words she did not understand. Tod gazed out the hazy, purple window and longed to be outside in the sun. She ached for the smell of the sea and the feel of sand beneath her bare feet once again. And she wanted to see Ferdie and Oskar so much that it hurt. As the meeting droned on and the hands on the clock hardly seemed to move, Tod made a decision. She would go to see Nicko and Snorri on the *Adventurer* as soon as she could. And then she would beg them to take her home. She could not bear being parted from Ferdie and Oskar a moment longer.

“Argh!” A sudden yell from Ferdie put an end to Oskar’s angry thoughts. She leaped to her feet, kicking out at the dead leaves, shouting, “Get off! *Get off!*”

Ferdie hopped around clutching her ankle, and Oskar caught sight of a small and very furry rodent scurrying for cover. “It’s a wood vole!” he exclaimed. “Oh, wow, I’ve never seen one before. Wasn’t it sweet?”

“Sweet? It bit me!” Ferdie said, rubbing her ankle. “You have a funny idea of *sweet*, Oskar Sam.”

Ten minutes later, having put both wood voles and Tod firmly out of their thoughts, Ferdie and Oskar set off from the clearing and took the path that the PathFinder villagers had been driven along. They were now in new territory. Soon they noticed that the trees were getting closer together and the light was growing dimmer; by midday the air felt cold. They pressed on through the afternoon, following the trail.

“It’s such a long way,” said Ferdie. “Torr must have been so tired. So scared . . .”

Oskar didn’t reply. He didn’t want to think about it.

The Far was getting very dense now and Oskar could tell that people had been split up into smaller groups in order to move through the trees. He imagined the Lady with her lamp striding up ahead, the terrified villagers staggering after her, herded by the Garmin, their yellow eyes flashing in the dark. Maybe some people had tried to make a break for it. Maybe a few villagers had got free and were now wandering, adrift in the depths of the Far. Maybe little Torr was one of them and now he was lost and alone and . . . Oskar shook the thoughts away. He must concentrate. He must follow the trail.

By late afternoon Ferdie and Oskar were very tired. The light was so dim that Oskar was using a light stick to follow the tracks. The trees felt oppressive and uncomfortably close, as though they were leaning over and watching them, and as Oskar and Ferdie pressed on, they began to hear strange howls and whoops from creatures that sounded a lot larger than wood voles.

“Oskie, we’d better stop before it gets really dark,” Ferdie said in a half whisper.

They had planned, if they were still in the Far by sundown, to spend the night up a tree. Oskar had prepared for this. He’d brought a weighted rope to throw over a branch and get them up a tree, a hammock for them to share, plus a thick blanket. But what Oskar hadn’t prepared for were the sounds of large creatures moving through the treetops. A sudden *crack*, then

the crash of something heavy falling through the trees made them both freeze.

“What was *that*?” whispered Ferdie.

“Big,” said Oskar. He stared up, trying to see into the dark green canopy above, but all he could see was a swaying branch and a drift of leaves falling to the ground. The trees no longer felt so safe.

“Perhaps we should keep going,” said Ferdie.

“Yeah,” said Oskar. “Perhaps we should.”

The trail had the look of chaos about it now. It wound drunkenly through the trees and Oskar could see places where people had sat down, where they had stumbled and signs of a struggle where it looked like someone had put up a fight. He wondered what had happened to them. Some ten minutes later, Oskar stopped. “I can’t see the trail anymore, Ferd. It’s too dark.”

Ferdie did not reply.

“Ferd?” asked Oskar.

Ferdie was staring intently ahead. “Shh,” she hissed.

“*What?*” whispered Oskar.

“Look, Oskie.” Ferdie pointed through the trees. “Lights. I can see lights up ahead.”

Oskar waited a few seconds to allow his eyes to adjust from the glow of the light stick, and then looked. He saw them too: small white lights in the distance, unmoving, forming a regular pattern, with the occasional flash of a small, very bright, red light, which *did* move.

“I think it’s some kind of building,” Ferdie whispered.

“Yeah,” said Oskar. “It’s *big*.”

Ferdie looked at Oskar excitedly, her skin and long red hair shimmering in the dark, her eyes shining with excitement. “That’s where they are, Oskie. I’m sure of it. *That’s where they are!*”

“But I can’t see the trail, Ferd,” said Oskar. “We don’t know for sure.”

“*I know for sure,*” Ferdie declared. “Come on, Oskie, we’re going to find them!”

THE FAR FORTRESS

Oskar led the way. “Try to tread and move *exactly* as I do,” he whispered to Ferdie. “Then no one will see us coming. Okay?”

They put on their night gloves and pulled up their hoods, then Oskar moved forward, as silent and sinuous as a snake. Ferdie followed, not quite as silently but doing the best she could. The lights grew closer and very soon they reached the last of the trees. In front of them was an open patch of grass, in the middle of which squatted a short, round tower topped with battlements from which a brilliant red pinpoint of light could be seen moving slowly along. The tower stood out dark against a bright background of floodlights shining down from the battlements, illuminating the clearing in which it sat. Below the battlements was a single line of brightly lit slit windows. On either side of the tower stretching out like pale arms were two single-story stone buildings with no visible windows at all.

“It’s like a fortress,” Oskar whispered.

“It’s horrible,” said Ferdie.

“There are guards,” Oskar whispered. “Look. On the battlements.” He pointed to a figure, tall and bristling with spikes, holding a long lance that sent a needle-thin beam of red light up into the sky.

“We have to get in there, Oskie.” Ferdie sounded desperate. “They are there, I can feel it.”

Oskar frowned. “How can you possibly *feel* that, Ferd? You can wish they were there. You can think that it’s very likely they are there, but you can’t *feel* that they are there.”

Ferdie returned Oskar’s frown with an added scowl. “Well, I can. *So there.*”

“Huh,” muttered Oskar, unimpressed. Ferdie stood up. “Sit *down*,” he hissed. “They’ll see you.”

“No,” Ferdie told him crossly. She stared intently across the open ground to the long, low arm of the fortress that stretched toward them.

“Oskie,” she said excitedly. “I can see a door at the end. That’s where we can get in!”

Oskar cast a knowledgeable eye across the open space. The wide, undulating patch of turf was lit by floodlights on the top of the towers and was frighteningly exposed. But Oskar could see that the lights were not well aligned and there were some deep shadows between the beams. The dips in the ground could, he thought, also lend cover. But it was a huge risk and Oskar didn’t give much for their chances of getting across unobserved. “Ferd,” he said, “you’re crazy. Suppose the trail doesn’t stop here? Maybe it carries on through the Far—and what happens then? We get into this place, they catch us and that’s it. We’ll never find Mum and Dad and Torr, will we?”

“Don’t be silly, Oskie,” said Ferdie. “Mum and Dad and Torr are in there. Everyone from the village is in there. I *told* you. I can *feel* it.”

Oskar was struggling to keep his temper. “Look, Ferd,” he said. “*Feeling* is no more than wishful thinking. But we will know for sure tomorrow as soon as it gets light and I can see the trail.”

“And then it will be light enough for those guards up there to see us, won’t it? And a fat lot of use that will be.”

Oskar and Ferdie were dangerously close to having a serious fight. Oskar did what he usually did at that point: he stopped talking. Ferdie also did what she usually did: she pushed things too far.

“Oskar Sarn, you are a *wuss*,” she hissed.

“And you are an *idiot*. Hey, Ferd. *Come back*.” But Ferdie was up and running. Horrified, Oskar watched her heading toward the fortress, zigzagging through the shadows like a rabbit escaping a fox. Oskar broke cover. Dodging into the shadows, he raced across the exposed turf, following Ferdie’s dark shape.

Craaaack!

A shot from the tower echoed across the clearing. A flock of large birds fluttered up from the trees and a warning *whoop-whoop* came from a creature somewhere deep in the Far. Ferdie threw herself into a dip in the ground and in a moment Oskar had landed beside her feet.

Craaack! Craaack!

There was a crashing through the branches, the thud of a heavy body falling from a tree and then a triumphant boom of a voice from the top of the tower. “Got ’im!”

“They’ve shot something,” Ferdie whispered, a little unnecessarily.

The booming voice continued. “Go and pick ’im up, pie-face. There’s some good meat on that one.”

“You shot him; you pick him up,” was the response.

There was a loud thump from the battlements and then, “Ouch! That hurt!”

“Good. So do as yer told.”

“All right, all right. I’m going.”

There was silence while, Oskar and Ferdie guessed, one of the guards was coming down from his post.

“Hurry,” whispered Oskar. “Before he gets down here.”

Crawling like snakes, they made their way across the grass as fast and efficient as any python. At the precise moment the thud of boots hit what sounded like hollow ground, they reached the door safely. Crouching in the shadows, they watched the guard tramp off toward the trees where so recently they had been hiding.

“See?” whispered Ferdie. “It’s a good thing we didn’t stay there.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Oskar, still annoyed.

“Can you open it?” Ferdie pointed up at the door.

Close up it looked formidable—a thick slab of iron peppered with rivets—but Oskar knew that the metal of the door would make it easy to listen to the telltale click of levers inside the lock.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “I think I can.” Oskar pushed up the rusty plate covering the lock to reveal a small keyhole. He selected a large pin with a bend in it from his lock-pick kit and set to work, while Ferdie kept watch.

Suddenly from the trees there was a yell. “Hey!”

Oskar froze—*they’d been seen*.

“Hey you, fatso!” the yell continued. “Yes, you up there. If you want tree-leopard steak tonight, you can come down and give me a hand. I’m not doing my back in, thank you very much.”

From the top of the tower came a very rude word.

Oskar put his ear to the door once more. He gave the pick a sharp twist and as the second set of heavy boots hit the ground, he felt the lock move. As the guard’s heavy footsteps headed toward them, Oskar pushed against the door. It moved silently open and in a moment they were inside the fortress.

They knew at once that they were in a cellblock. A wide, straight corridor lit by a line of white, hissing lanterns hanging from the ceiling ran to another iron door at the far, misty end. On both sides of the corridor were cell doors with tiny barred windows set in them at eye level.

“They were in those cells,” Ferdie whispered.

“But they’re not there now,” said Oskar.

Ferdie concentrated hard. “No. But they are here somewhere.”

“Okay. We’ll keep looking.” The sight of the cells had shocked Oskar. He was beginning to take Ferdie seriously.

They moved stealthily along the passageway. Oskar checked a few cells, but he saw nothing but bare sleeping shelves. At the iron door at the far end of the corridor he carefully pushed the plate covering the lock to one side. Something moved—it was the door. “It’s open!” he whispered.

They slipped through the gap and walked straight into something pink and squashy.

MY LADY'S CHAMBER

A huge sofa, lavishly upholstered in pink velvet and awash with a sea of tiny blue silk cushions, had been placed a few feet in front of the door. It took Ferdie and Oskar some seconds to understand that they were actually in someone's bedroom. It was a very large, round room clad in dark wooden paneling above which were painted vibrant blue and pink stripes with a row of tiny windows far too high up to look out of. A big four-poster bed hung with shining blue silk stood opposite them. There were two large painted wardrobes on either side of the bed, and the rest of the room was taken up with tiny chairs with bendy legs painted in gold leaf. Ferdie shuddered; there was no doubt in her mind as to whom this room belonged.

Oskar hardly noticed the contents of the room—to him it was just a stuffy old room full of weird furniture. However, he did notice a metal door identical to the one they had just come through, leading off from the other side of the room. He had no doubt that it, too, led to a cellblock. Oskar was about to suggest they check it out when Ferdie grabbed him and pulled him down behind the sofa. “*There's someone coming,*” she hissed.

They heard a sharp *click* of a concealed door opening in the paneling beside the bed, and then Ferdie heard something that made her go cold—the trilling voice she had grown to loathe during her time aboard the *Tristan*.

“How many more does he want, for goodness' sake?” the Lady was demanding.

Ferdie and Oskar heard the rustle of silk as the Lady swept across the room. They heard footsteps hurrying behind her and a voice said, “My Lady, he has asked for twenty.”

The voice was shockingly familiar. *Aunt Mitza*, Oskar mouthed to Ferdie.

Ferdie opened her eyes wide in astonishment.

“And we are sending him *thirty-five,*” said the Lady. “So what is his problem?”

Aunt Mitza sounded unusually conciliatory. “My Lady, as you know, these thirty-five are not regular workers. They have other . . . er, skills. Well, maybe three or four of them do—if we are lucky.”

“So he can use the other thirty-one.” There was a crackle of silk, the sigh of overstuffed upholstery and Oskar and Ferdie felt the joints of the sofa sag as the Lady sat down. The sickly-sweet smell of powder took Ferdie right back to the *Tristan*. She felt panic beginning to rise. Oskar looked at Ferdie in alarm; he knew she wanted to run. He gave her the PathFinder “okay?” sign with his left hand. Ferdie gave Oskar a strained smile and returned his sign using her right hand.

Aunt Mitza was a changed woman. Her grating, impatient tones had been replaced by a conciliatory wheedle. “But my Lady,” she said, “by the time we discover which three or four are the useful ones, the other thirty-one may not be very, er . . . *employable*. Ha-ha.”

“Humph.” Oskar and Ferdie felt the Lady give an irritated wiggle on the sofa. “Then send the creatures out to get some more. There are settlements on the other side of the Far.”

“With the waxing of the moon, every night becomes brighter, my Lady,” Aunt Mitza replied uneasily.

“I know what the moon does,” came the snappy response.

“Indeed, my Lady. You are an accomplished observer of the heavens. But it is not advantageous to use Garmin past half moon. Their paleness gives them away.”

There was a sudden movement and the sofa upholstery groaned in relief. The Lady had got to her feet. “Tell me something I *don't* know, Mitza,” she snapped.

“Um. I cannot, my Lady. Your immense knowledge far exceeds my own small sum of learning.” Oskar rolled his eyes at Ferdie. *What a creep*, he mouthed.

They heard the Lady sigh. “How I wish my little pet had not left me.”

“Your pet, my Lady? Did you have a little dog?”

“No, Mitza. The girl from the test run on the village. The girl who sewed so nicely and was too good to send to that awful pit. *She* spoke plain and simple. *She* looked me in the eye, unlike you, Mitza. Or anyone else, for that matter. I am surrounded by a tribe of sycophants.”

Aunt Mitza did not know what a sycophant was, but suspected it to be related to an elephant. “We do our best, my Lady,” she murmured. “And

like those magnificently determined, great gray beasts, we, too, will get there in the end.”

“What a lot of tosh you do talk, Mitza. Perhaps I should send *you* along to make up the numbers.”

“No, no, my Lady! I beg you!”

“Oh, give it a rest; you’re safe for the moment.” The Lady sighed wistfully. “But my little pet, she would have stared me down and dared me to send her. She had such spirit. And she never *did* tell me her name.”

Suddenly Oskar and Ferdie heard a swift, light footfall approaching. They looked at each other in panic—anyone coming through the door would see them at once. They crawled very carefully toward the end of the sofa, hoping they could take cover behind its overstuffed arm. They didn’t make it. The door from the cellblock swung open and a young woman hurried in. She had long brown hair worn in two plaits tied together; she wore a tired-looking dress with the remains of a few ribbons woven through the cuffs of her sleeves and a pair of scuffed but sturdy brown boots. Her face was thin and there were deep, dark circles beneath her eyes. Ferdie thought she looked haunted.

The young woman gave a quick curtsy and began to speak. “Those in Block One have gone through, my Lady, but there is some trouble with Block Two. The guards ask for permission to get reinforcements from the tower.”

“No. The tower must be kept secure. Trouble? I’ll give them trouble. I will be down directly.”

“Yes, my Lady.” The young woman did not move.

“Well, go on, girl. Go and tell them.”

“Oh, my Lady . . .”

“*What?*”

“It—it is so harsh to send a whole village. The little ones are so upset. Can’t you let the children go free?”

Ferdie and Oskar exchanged glances.

The Lady’s reply was not a surprise. “No.”

“But *surely*—”

“Madam, you forget yourself. We had a deal. If you want your boy back you will do as you are told.”

“But I never thought that I’d be doing *this*.”

The Lady laughed. “What did you think you’d be doing—making fairy cakes? Wise up, girl. Come, Mitza. We will go below and sort out the troublemakers.”

Oskar and Ferdie froze. They saw the Lady sweep out of the door, with Aunt Mitza scurrying behind. The young woman stared after them and burst into tears.

“Madam!” came the Lady’s shout.

The young woman rubbed the tears from her eyes and hurried to the door. As she was about to go through, something caught her eye. She stopped and stared.

Ferdie and Oskar froze. They had been discovered.

MADAM

“How did you escape?” the young woman hissed, glancing around to check the room was empty.

Ferdie sized up their opponent. The young woman’s brown eyes were friendly and she was nervously twisting one of her long plaits through her bitten-to-the-quick fingers. Ferdie liked her.

“We haven’t escaped,” Ferdie whispered. “We’ve broken in. We’re trying to find our parents and our little brother. *Please* don’t say anything.”

The young woman sighed. “It’s okay, I won’t tell on you. But take my advice: get out of here while you can. She’ll get you, too. Like she gets *everyone*.”

“But we *have* to find them,” Ferdie said stubbornly.

The young woman shrugged. She seemed defeated. “Okay. If they are from that shiny-hair village, then they’re here.”

Oskar looked amazed. “Really?”

“They’re downstairs. Where I have to go.” With that, the young woman hurried out.

Ferdie and Oskar scooted after her just in time to see her push open a door on the left and disappear inside. They quickly followed and found themselves at the top of a flight of spiral steps, lit by lanterns that gave out a dull red light. Halfway down the young woman realized they were following her.

She waited for them to catch up. “You’re crazy,” she said in a low, urgent voice. “There’s nothing you can do to help them, got that? Just go. *Get out of here*.”

“Madam! Where are you?” The Lady’s accusing voice flew up the spirals of the stairs.

“I am coming, my Lady!” The young woman hurried down, flapping her hands at Oskar and Ferdie in shooing-away movements.

But Oskar and Ferdie were too close to give up now. They tiptoed down the steps, picking their way carefully. The air was cold and damp, and

smelled of fear. They heard barked commands of the guards: “*Move! Move! Move!*” Then a sudden scream . . . someone sobbing . . . the frightened wailing of a child. Oskar looked at Ferdie in dismay. The child was too young to be Torr, but the sobbing could so easily be their mother.

They reached the last twist of the stairs and a shaft of white light glanced up from below. Oskar and Ferdie wrapped their night cloaks around them, pulled their hoods farther down over their faces, then peered gingerly around the last twist of the stairs. They saw a large, round chamber, with twelve archways leading off from it. They saw the sheen of PathFinder hair and the shining steel of the spikes on the guards’ helmets and elbows as, prodding with long red-tipped sticks, they herded the villagers into one of the archways.

Ferdie peered around the last spiral, straining to see. Beyond the broad metal backs of three guards, Ferdie saw a mass of people being pushed toward the archway and, one by one, disappearing down it. Ferdie could name every person there, but she could not see her parents and little Torr. A wave of desolation ran through her—*she was too late*. Suddenly a guard who had been obscuring her view stepped to one side and Ferdie saw her mother.

Ferdie didn’t care anymore. She took off down the steps, yelling, “Mum, it’s me, Ferdie. I’m okay! Mum, Mum! I love you, Mum!”

Rosie Sarn whirled around, and Ferdie saw that she had Torr clasped tightly to her. “*Ferdieeeee!*” Rosie screamed.

Feeling as though he were in a nightmare, Oskar crept down a few more steps, watching in horror as the scene unfolded before him.

“Mum!” Ferdie was in the Hub now, running headlong toward the guards. Her sudden appearance confused them, and Ferdie was able to plunge into the throng unhindered. Desperately Rosie Sarn tried to push her way back toward her daughter.

A piercing shriek came from the shadows on the far side of the Hub. “My pet! My pet!”

Oskar saw a flash of shimmering blue, like a giant kingfisher diving for its favorite fish, and the Lady plunged after Ferdie.

It was pandemonium. The guards stood, uncertain what to do. They were unwilling to act without orders and their commander was running amok. The chamber echoed with competing shouts.

“Mum, Mum!”

“My pet! My pet!”

“Ferdie, Ferdie!”

And then, suddenly they were together—Ferdie, her mother and Torr hugging one another as though the world were about to end. And then it very nearly did. A pair of soft white hands with an iron grip wrenched Ferdie from her mother’s arms. Her mother landed a punch on the Lady’s nose and Torr began to scream.

But the Lady screamed louder. “Guards! Guards!” she yelled. “Get them off me!”

The guards waded into the group, which scattered before the fearsome red-tipped sticks. Some villagers ran voluntarily into the arch to escape; others were pushed. With the Lady’s long nails digging into her arms, Ferdie watched her mother and little brother being herded through the archway, and then suddenly, as if a switch had been thrown, Torr’s cries stopped.

Sticking to her resolution never to cry in front of the Lady, Ferdie bit her lip. She gave a quick glance at the stairs but all she could see was the young woman with the faded ribbons dangling from her sleeves standing on the bottom step. She had her hands over her face and her big brown eyes were staring through her fingers in shock.

The Lady dismissed the guards and turned her attention to her new prisoner. “You were so naughty to leave me,” she told Ferdie. Her face dimpled into a frown and her fat white fingers tightened around Ferdie’s wrist.

Ferdie was thinking fast. The tears in the Lady’s eyes told her that all was not lost. If only, she thought, Oskar had enough sense to go back up the stairs and get out, she could talk the Lady round, if she played it right. Ferdie hated lying, but she forced herself to speak. “I’m really sorry,” she said. “I’ve come back because . . . I missed you.”

The Lady’s expression melted. She let go of Ferdie’s wrist. “Did you really?” she asked. A movement on the stairs made the Lady look up, and Ferdie was spared having to answer by the Lady’s shout of, “You, Madam! Come here!”

The young woman came reluctantly, like a dog pulled across the room on an invisible lead. She caught Ferdie’s eye and a glance of sympathy passed between them.

“Yes, my Lady?”

The Lady launched into a torrent of abuse. “You, you trumped-up piece of *nothing*, are a sulky little madam and no use to me at all. You were meant to get those people away hours ago, and instead I find myself dragged into a *sordid* fight.” She put a handkerchief to her throbbing nose. “It’s disgraceful!”

Ferdie saw fear jump into the young woman’s eyes. “I—I did my best, my Lady,” she stammered.

“Your best is not good enough, *Madam*. You have one last chance to prove yourself and then you can forget about your precious son forever. Understand?”

Ferdie saw the young woman press her lips together to try to stay in control.

“One last chance,” the Lady steamrolled on. “Our quota this month is twenty short. And you, *Madam*, will provide the shortfall.”

The young woman looked horrified. “*Me?*”

“*You*, *Madam*. You live in a well-populated Castle, do you not? They will not miss twenty fools from there, I am sure.”

“No! Oh no . . . please, *no*.”

The Lady shrugged, as if bored with the conversation. “Well, *Madam*. I hear your boy is still alive. However, I cannot guarantee he will stay that way.”

The young woman was as white as a sheet of paper. “I . . . I’ll do it,” she whispered. “I just need to . . . to work out how . . . to get them.”

“You have until this time tomorrow.”

“No!” The young woman gasped.

“Yes! If I do not have twenty people right *here* by then, I promise you will never see your son again.” The Lady smiled. “Because, *Madam*, there will be nothing left of him to see.”

The young woman turned gray.

“You have a choice,” the Lady said coldly. “I leave it up to you.” Another movement on the stairs caught the Lady’s eye. “A boy! There’s a boy left behind!”

Ferdie stared in horror. Unnoticed by Oskar, the hood of his cloak had fallen back and his red hair was shimmering in the dimness of the stairs. Ferdie saw Oskar’s eyes wide and dark, staring out from his pale face, like a rabbit caught in a beam of light. “*Run, Oskie. Run,*” she muttered under her breath.

But Oskar knew he couldn't leave Ferdie. There was only one thing to do—he ran straight at the Lady. In a moment he was at Ferdie's side. The Lady went to grab him, and Oskar, truly his mother's son, landed another punch.

The Lady's hands flew up to her nose and blood began dripping between her fingers, soaking into the silk of her dress in angry, dark patches. Oskar looked shocked at the effect—he'd never punched anyone before.

"Quick! This way," the young woman whispered urgently. To Ferdie and Oskar's surprise, she turned and hurried into one of the archways with the letters *VII* carved into it. Ferdie grabbed Oskar's hand and they ran.

"Dop!" the Lady screamed out from beneath a rapidly reddening handkerchief. "Dop!"

Inside Way VII, Ferdie and Oskar ran along a tunnel, following the young woman toward a shimmering white mist. And when she disappeared into it, they hurled themselves after her, no longer caring what lay beyond. Whatever it was, it had to be better.

ORDERS

The Lady stared into Way VII in dismay. She dared not follow. The last time she had **Gone Through** there she had fallen straight over a precipice and very nearly drowned. She hoped that the little madam would fall in tonight, just as she had. She swore and tugged violently on a bellpull.

In her tiny room—known as the kennel—at the far end of the Garmin cages in Cell Block Two, Mitza Draddenmora Draa was summoned by the screeching of a bell. A few minutes later she arrived breathless into the Hub to find the Lady holding a bloody handkerchief to her nose.

“You rang, my Lady?” Mitza’s voice trembled.

“Send Garbin into Way Sebben!” the Lady yelled through her dripping handkerchief.

“How many, my Lady?” Mitza asked anxiously. The Garmin terrified her.

“All.”

“*All?*” Mitza asked faintly.

“All. I’ll show that Madam and her precious Castle. They’ll be sorry!”



PART IX

THE OUTSIDE PATH

In a tall, ancient castle wall some twenty feet above a dark, slow-flowing moat, the outline of an archway began to glow with a dim purple light. If anyone had been standing on the far side of the water they would have seen the eerie sight of the archway appearing out of seemingly solid stone, and a strange white mist swirling within its depths. But it was late in the evening, the Castle drawbridge was raised and no one was foolish enough to walk the Forest edges at night.

Suddenly, from out of the mist, a wild-eyed young woman came running. Just in time she grabbed hold of the edge of the arch to stop herself from falling headlong into the Moat below. She turned and shouted a warning: “Slow down! There’s a steep drop!” She stood in the entrance while two smaller figures appeared from the depths. They stopped dead—breathless and confused.

“It’s really narrow,” the young woman whispered. “I’ll move along a bit. You must lean back against the wall, okay?”

“Okay,” said Ferdie. She didn’t care how narrow it was. She was free of the Lady once more. She took a deep breath of unfamiliar, damp air. Above was the night sky, scattered with stars; ahead, the darkness of trees; and far below, dark reflections in water, slowly moving. Shuffling sideways, Ferdie made room for Oskar.

Oskar could smell the earthiness of land, the wet woodiness of trees and the sharpness of water—but not seawater. This was fresh, but muddy. He knew at once they were far away from home.

“Come on, you two, let’s get going.” Oskar recognized the voice of the young woman. “Be careful,” she said. “There’s only a ledge here and the stones are loose. Hold on to the wall, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“And don’t look down. By the way, I’m Lucy. Lucy Heap.”

“Ferdie,” said Ferdie.

“Oskar,” said Oskar.

“Sarn,” they both said together.

The path was precarious. At times it was so narrow that all they could do was to edge along crab-wise; at other times it would widen but be covered with slippery gravel. Oskar was last and he kept glancing back to see who—or what—was following. To his relief, he saw and heard nothing. He hurried along, following Ferdie and Lucy Heap by the dim light of the moon, which was sinking toward the treetops on the far side of the water.

After a frighteningly narrow section of the path, Ferdie and Oskar saw a light ahead. Lucy sped up and soon they were picking their way down some precarious steps, which took them down to a slipway where dark water gently lapped. Here was the light that Ferdie had seen—a lantern illuminating a sign that read: *Rupert’s Paddleboat Hire*.

Lucy looked anxiously back along the path. “Not far now,” she whispered, hurrying them up the slipway.

The slipway led into a street with tall, thin houses on the left-hand side and lower, smaller houses on the right. After the dark of the pathway it was bright and cheerful—many of the houses had lights in the windows, and one had a blaze of candles burning at every window. It was to a little house opposite this that the young woman took Oskar and Ferdie. She opened the front door and they followed her inside to a narrow passageway cluttered with boxes and bags.

“Simon,” Lucy called out softly. “Si, are you there?”

A door at the end opened and a young man dressed in black appeared. He looked, thought Ferdie, both anxious and relieved at the same time.

“Lu!” he said, hurrying toward them. And then, suddenly noticing the shimmer from Ferdie’s and Oskar’s hair, he stopped. “Who are they?” he said suspiciously.

“It’s . . .” Lucy hurled herself into Simon’s arms. “Oh, it’s awful. Just awful.”

WILLIAM

Ferdie and Oskar were sitting beside the fire in a small front room lined with books. While Simon placed some mugs full of something hot on the table in front of them and Lucy put down a plate of biscuits with trembling hands, Ferdie looked at the books. They were an odd mixture of knitting patterns, **Magyk**, building construction manuals and Alchemie texts. The lower shelves were full of brightly colored children's books and some well-worn toys.

The mugs contained herbal tea, which smelled like old straw. But Ferdie and Oskar were glad for the warmth, and they sat cradling their mugs, listening to the story of how the Lady had invaded the lives of Simon and Lucy Heap.

Lucy began. "Two months ago our little boy, William, disappeared."

Ferdie and Oskar exchanged glances—so it wasn't happening only to them.

"William . . . he was—I mean, he *is*—only six." Lucy stopped for a moment, took a deep breath and continued. "William loved to sail his toy boat in the Moat. One day after school I let him go to the slipway with his friends to play with their boats. It was a lovely, warm evening and it was still light, and he was perfectly safe—well, I thought he was—because his uncle, my brother Rupert, has a boathouse there and he was working outside, keeping an eye on them. Well . . . oh, it was *all* my fault . . . I just didn't notice how late it was getting—I was busy working on a design for a stupid tower thingy. Suddenly I realized it was nearly dark and William wasn't home. I ran out of the house and there was no one at the end of the slipway—no little boys and no Rupert. It was deserted. I raced down to the water and shouted for William. Rupert came out and said he thought that William had gone home when all his friends did. I yelled at Rupert for being so *stupid* and then I saw William's favorite toy—a little white knitted sheep his granny made him—up on the Outside Path—you know, where we just walked along." Lucy gulped. "I knew then that something terrible had

happened. I ran along the Outside Path so fast you wouldn't believe it. It curves around with the Castle walls, so you can never see very far ahead, and it was really dark by then because there was no moon that night, but as I got around the bend I saw something." Lucy shuddered. "A huge animal, white and horrible, with a head like a snake. Standing up on two legs. *And then I saw it go through the wall.*"

Simon sighed. He looked wretched and Ferdie felt sorry for him. She could tell he did not believe Lucy—but Ferdie believed her, all right. And so did Oskar.

Lucy continued with her story. "I raced toward where the white thing had disappeared but there was no sign of anything. The wall was . . . well, it was just a wall. And it was dark by then too."

"We searched all night," Simon said quietly.

Lucy nodded dismally. "People were wonderful. So many came to look for him. The next day Rupert found William's toy boat floating in the Moat, and everyone began to say he must have fallen in the water and drowned. They went out searching for his . . . well, you know, for *him*, but I knew he hadn't drowned. *I just knew.* The next day Simon and I walked along the Outside Path looking for clues. But we found nothing." Lucy looked down at crumb-covered rug in front of the fire. "Simon, there's something I haven't told you."

Simon leaned forward, his green eyes fixed on Lucy. "Lu—what haven't you told me?"

"Um. Well. Every day, while you were at work—" Lucy broke off and said to Ferdie and Oskar proudly, "Simon's the Deputy Castle Alchemist, you know. Every day I walked the Outside Path to where I'd seen the white things. I would stare at the wall for hours—I was so sure that something had to be there. And then, one day, I saw it: the outline of a filled-in archway with some faint letters carved into the keystone: 'IV.' I was so excited—I'd found it! *I knew* that was where the Garmin had taken William."

"Garmin?" said Simon dismissively. "That's a mythical creature. Garmin don't exist."

Ferdie took a deep breath. Simon scared her a little, but she had to speak up. "But Garmin do exist. And they *do* take people away. People like me."

Lucy shot Ferdie a look of surprise.

Aware that Simon's intense, piercingly green eyes were on her, Ferdie said, "Garmin took me one night at the dark of the moon. They took me

from my house.”

Lucy took a deep breath. “Si, Garmin took William away. And I’ve been trying to get him back.”

“*What?*” Simon looked dumbstruck.

“You remember one month after William disappeared I went missing?”

“All night,” said Simon. “I’m hardly going to forget that, Lu.”

“Well, I figured that William had gone at the dark of the moon, and maybe that meant something. I thought that maybe if I went back to that place at the next dark of the moon I would see something. I didn’t tell you because I knew you thought I was crazy to think like that. But that’s what I did. I went back to the filled-in archway.”

“You went on the Outside Path at the dark of the moon?” Simon was aghast. “Lu, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you would have stopped me. Or made me think I was silly. Or something. Anyway, I had marked the archway with white chalk so I found it easily in the dark. I leaned back against the stones that filled it in and waited.” Lucy shivered. “I was so scared. And then . . . and then it happened.” She stopped and took a deep breath. The atmosphere in the little room was tense.

“Suddenly there was nothing behind me and I fell back into an empty space. I picked myself up and realized I was in a tunnel—a tunnel that would lead me to William. I ran into it and all at once I felt like I was falling down and down and down. It seemed to go on forever—well, long enough for me to think that at least now I knew what had happened to William. He had fallen through some kind of hole and now I had too. Just as I understood that I wasn’t actually falling—it felt more like something was pulling me along—I was out, hurtling into a big, round cellar with lots more arches, and I ran straight into something big, blue and squashy.”

“The Lady!” said Ferdie.

“Yes. And I was so pleased to see her. You see, I thought that she was looking after our William. I thought that he had somehow fallen through to this place and that now I would see him again and I could bring him home and I . . .” Lucy choked back a sob. “How *stupid* can you be?” she asked bitterly.

Simon was staring at his wife in amazement. “Why?” he asked. “Why is that stupid?”

“Because, Si, this spiteful, vicious, cruel person has stolen our William, just like she has stolen others. She uses children to get hold of their parents, sometimes their whole *village*. She uses Garmin to collect people and then she sends them away to serve some tyrant in some horrible place somewhere, I have no idea where. And she doesn’t care about *anyone*.” Lucy turned to Ferdie. “Except she quite likes you, I think.”

“I *hate* her,” Ferdie growled, not wanting to be seen as having anything to do with the Lady.

Simon was on his feet again. “Take me through that archway, Lu. I’ll show her she can’t mess with us. I’ll—”

“Sit down, Si. It’s not that simple.”

Simon sat down. Lucy was in charge now.

“Si, this is the bit I am not proud of. You see, the Lady told me that she would get William back if . . . if I helped her.”

“Help her do what, Lu?” Simon looked like he dreaded the answer.

“Well. Um. You see . . . the place I fell into is like some kind of transit post. She calls it a Hub. It’s somewhere in a fortress in the middle of a forest, I have no idea where. The Lady uses the Garmin to snatch people who live in out-of-the-way places so that no one notices they’ve gone for a while. Then she sends the people away through these arches. It’s awful.”

Simon was staring at Lucy in horror. “And you were *helping* her?”

“I was trying *not* to, Si. I helped quite a few people escape too, but yes, I suppose I *was* helping her. Si, I *had* to. It was our only hope of seeing William again.” Lucy hid her head in her hands and her voice shook. She looked up, her eyes full of tears. “Last night the Lady sent a whole village away—a *whole village*, Si. But it still wasn’t enough for her. She had twenty more people to find, she said. And she told me I had to get them for her. From here, from our Castle. And if I didn’t, then William would be . . .” Lucy was unable to finish.

“What did you say?” Simon asked quietly.

“I told her I would do it, but I needed time,” Lucy whispered. “But she didn’t give me any time.”

“How long did she give you?” Simon asked.

“One day.” Lucy burst into tears. “One measly day.”

SLEEPLESS

In the attic of Lucy and Simon's house, Ferdie and Oskar could not sleep. They gazed out of the little window into the night, amazed at the place they had come to. An autumn mist had come in, but they could still see the gap in the ancient Castle Wall where the slipway ran down to the Moat—wide, still and dark. On the other side of the street was a row of tall, narrow houses—the one directly in front still had its windows ablaze with lighted candles—and beyond that they saw rooftops disappearing into the mist, with lights in people's windows flickering through the darkness.

Ferdie and Oskar were fascinated. They had never seen so many houses before, never dreamed that they could be crammed so close together. They watched the lights glistening in the nighttime mist and tried to imagine all the thousands of people so close by. But one thing they did not imagine was that no more than half a mile away was Tod, lying in her bunk on the *Adventurer*, also finding it hard to sleep—because the *Adventurer* was catching the early-morning tide and Nicko and Snorri were taking her home.

The mist grew thicker and a chill began to seep through the window. Ferdie and Oskar were about to retreat to the warmth of the quilts piled onto the beds that Lucy had made up for them, when they heard a door open and close on the landing below and heavy footsteps going down the stairs. A few seconds later came the muffled thud of the front door slamming, and their windowpanes shook. They peered down into the street below. Simon Heap was standing outside, and surrounding him was a faint purple glow.

"Look, Oskie," Ferdie whispered excitedly. "He's doing **Magyk!**" But before Oskar could see anything, Simon was striding away, his short dark cloak wrapped around him, heading rapidly up the street and into the mist.

Ferdie and Oskar were burrowed deep beneath their quilts, when ten minutes later, a group of Garmin came loping up from the slipway, their white, flat heads turning from side to side. They did not hear the *click-clicker-clicks* as the creatures walked along the street, heading straight for

Simon and Lucy's front door. They did not see them stop and sniff the air, their yellow eyes glinting in the light from the house opposite. And they did not feel them nudge the front door and then go staggering back as Simon's **Magykal Armed Bar** sent a shock wave of terror through them.

As the Garmin ran off, heading into the Castle, somewhere in the house Oskar and Ferdie heard the soft sound of Lucy Heap sobbing.

THE RAT OFFICE

One of the lights that Oskar and Ferdie had seen beyond the rooftops belonged to the East Gate Lookout Tower, home to the Castle's Message Rat service. Behind a scruffy wooden door with a brass plate declaring it to be the *Official Confidential Registered Rat Office* were three rats, two of whom were working late to the background music of snoring from the third. One rat was writing out a list of messages to be sent the next day. Most of these were birthday or anniversary messages, which the rat found extremely tedious. She transcribed the very last message—*Happy Birthday Binkie-Boo Twenty-One Again Ha-Ha From Guess Who*—and slammed it down onto a tall pile of message cards, color-coded green for Castle delivery.

“Done!” she said.

Mo—or Morris, to give the other rat his full name—threw down his pen with relief. He had been adding up the message money, which he hated. “What a day, Flo,” he said.

“Florence,” the other rat said severely. “I am Florence at work.”

“Well, we’re not at work, are we?” Morris pointed out. “You just said we were done.”

“We are still in the office, Morris, and that means we are on duty.”

A loud snort came from the third rat in the office, a rotund elderly rat asleep in a rocking chair. “See?” said Florence. “Da agrees with me.” She raised her voice. “Don’t you, Da?”

Another snort came in reply. Florence and Morris looked at the elderly rat in amused affection. He was slumped back in his rocking chair, his hands folded over his plump tummy, his mouth open in a little whistling O with his two long front teeth just touching his lower lip.

“It seems a shame to wake him,” said Florence.

Morris nodded. “Yeah. I’ll get his rug and cover him up.”

“And his pillow,” said Florence.

They tucked the old rat into his chair, propped his head up against his favorite pillow and headed for the stairs to the living quarters above the

office.

Tiiiiiiiiiiiiing! Tiiiiiiiiiiiiing! Tiiiiiiiiiiiiing!

“Argh!” yelled Florence. She stared in dismay at a line of bells behind the desk, one of which was swinging wildly.

“Crumbs,” gasped Morris, reading the lighted square above the bell. “It’s the Palace.”

Tiiiiiiiiiiiiing! Tiiiiiiiiiiiiing! Tiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!

“Waassermarrer?” The old rat sat bolt upright in his chair. He looked puzzled for a few moments while he worked out where he was and then he threw off his rug. “Answer it, Florence,” he said. “Immediate dispatch. We mustn’t keep Her Majesty waiting.”

“Yes, Da.” Florence hurried across to a panel of different-colored buttons below the bells and quickly pressed the green one. A panel below the button lit up. It said: *Message received. Rat dispatched immediately. ETA three minutes.*

“Right,” the old rat said. “I’m off.”

Both Florence and Morris looked aghast. “But you *can’t*,” they chorused.

“Yes, I can,” said the rat. “As senior rat I *must* go. The Queen will expect *me* to, due to the fact *I* am a friend of royalty.”

Florence and Morris exchanged exasperated glances. “But what about your Bumblefoot?” said Morris.

“Bother the Bumblefoot,” said the old rat. “Florence, press the twenty-minute delay.”

Florence pressed an orange button. The panel below shone with the message, *Apologies. Rat delayed due to unforeseen circumstances. ETA twenty minutes.*

From the little window in the room above the office, Florence and Morris watched their adoptive father, Stanley, scuttle off.

“Perhaps I ought to go after him,” said Morris. “And check he’s okay.”

“I think,” said Florence, “that would be a really good idea.”

Morris hurried off into the misty night and soon saw the old rat’s bulky shape lolloping along in front of him. Stanley suffered from Bumblefoot in both feet, and after a fast start to show off to the watchers in the window, he had slowed to a painful hobble as soon as he thought he was out of sight. Morris slowed his pace to match that of the old rat, and set about shadowing him. All he wanted to do was see Stanley to the Palace and back safely.

Morris followed Stanley along the path on the top of the Castle Wall, which was the quickest way for a rat—or anyone else with a good head for heights—to get to the Palace, and before long they came to the steps that led down to Snake Slipway. Morris waited for the old rat to ease his way down and quickly followed after him. Stanley weaved through the upturned paddleboats on the hard standing on the front of Rupert Gringe’s boatyard and headed up Snake Slipway into the brightly lit street beyond.

It was here that Morris, a sensitive rat, began to feel uneasy. The glowing purple **Armed Bar** on the door of the Deputy Alchemist’s house spooked him, but it wasn’t just that. Morris could smell something vile—a foul mixture of snake, slime and dead dog. It made the young rat want to throw up. But in front of him Stanley, who had almost lost his sense of smell, carried on regardless.

The old rat was now tottering toward the mouth of the rat-run—an ancient drainpipe—that ran beneath the Palace gardens and would take him directly into the Palace itself. He was very nearly there when Morris saw a nightmare ahead. Coming out of the darkness were three white shapes, even bigger than a human, walking almost upright on long, horselike legs, with wide, white snakeheads. Morris’s little rat heart began to beat even faster than usual as he watched Stanley hobbling toward the creatures, clearly not having seen them. If only Stanley would speed up just a little, Morris thought. All he had to do was get inside the rat-run and he would be safe.

The lead Garmin stopped and looked down at Stanley. Morris held his breath—surely a fat, elderly rat pottering along the street was not worth bothering about? He watched the Garmin’s bright yellow eyes follow Stanley’s unsteady progress, its head to one side as if deciding what to do.

Morris could watch no longer. He broke cover. Hurling toward Stanley across the street, he saw the yellow eyes of the three Garmin latch on to him. “Run, Dadso, *run!*” Morris squealed high and shrill in rat-squeak. Stanley looked around, puzzled. He saw Morris racing toward him and then, at last, he saw the terrifying white shapes above. He saw the red open mouth of the nearest snakehead; he saw its long black tongue flick out, dripping thick saliva onto Morris’s shiny young coat, and then he saw its head dart down to snap up its victim.

Stanley forgot his Bumblefoot, forgot his creaking joints and his aching back and he leaped into the air, squealing, biting, kicking, punching out at the monstrous snakehead that was heading for his son. And somehow,

Stanley got it right. His clenched paw hit the pale spot between the Garmin's slitlike nostrils and the creature reeled back in silent pain. Stanley grabbed hold of the scruff of Morris's neck, pushed him into the mouth of the drainpipe and kept right on pushing (much helped by the slime covering Morris's coat) until he was certain they were out of reach of any questing snake tongue or stabbing claws.

The two rats lay exhausted and trembling in the drainpipe. After some minutes Morris croaked, "Thanks, Dadso."

"S'all right, son," mumbled Stanley. He got to his feet with a groan. "Right," he said. "Let's get going. Mustn't keep Her Maj waiting. What is it I always say?"

"I dunno. Er . . . Pass the biscuits?"

"No, son. *Nothing stops a Message Rat.*"

MESSAGE RECEIVED

Stanley and Morris emerged beneath the washbasin in one of the Palace cloakrooms off the Long Walk. With some difficulty, Stanley squeezed out through a hole gnawed in the bottom of the door and Morris easily followed. Stanley hobbled and Morris walked alongside him, and together they progressed down the Long Walk, Morris wide-eyed, staring at all the treasures glittering in the light of fat candles placed in the alcoves. The young rat had never been inside the Palace and he felt quite overawed. Eventually Stanley took a left turn and Morris followed him into a tall entrance hall with a grand staircase winding up to a gallery above. To their left was a line of little red and gold chairs ranged along the wall beside the old wooden Palace doors, and Stanley limped across to these. Above the chair nearest the doors was a brass sign, which read: *Reserved for Message Rat*. Beside it was a small set of steps. Wearily, Stanley climbed the steps and plonked himself down on the chair.

“Ring the bell, Morris,” Stanley said, pointing to a long red-cord bellpull beside the chair. “Just to let Her Maj know we’re here.”

Morris saw the Queen come hurrying around the corner, red robes flying. With her came a young man, who the rat recognized as Simon Heap, the Deputy Castle Alchemist. Morris scuttled under the chair. He watched the Queen’s sensible brown boots run across the checkered floor and stop right beside him, the heavy gold hem of her dress brushing against his tail.

On the chair above, Stanley struggled to sit up. “Message Rat reporting for duty, Your Majesty,” he wheezed.

“About time,” Jenna said crossly. “Stanley, where have you been?”

“So sorry, Your Maj. Had a bit of trouble,” Stanley replied weakly.

Jenna’s expression softened. “Stanley, you don’t look well,” she said. “Not well at all.”

“Possibly not,” Stanley agreed. Now he had got to his destination, he felt like a wet rag.

From beneath the chair Morris was shocked at how weak his father sounded. He knew what he had to do. He scampered up the steps—much to Jenna’s surprise—and jumped onto the Message Rat chair. Then he stood up on his hind legs, took a deep breath and began to squeak, “Your Majesty, I am the Deputy Message Rat on this mission. I am a Chartered Confidential Rat and I am at your service. Please state your message, its destination and recipient.”

Jenna and Simon scrutinized the young rat. Despite its strange appearance—it was covered in strings of sticky white stuff—they could tell that it was squeaking in a purposeful way.

“Tell it the **Speeke**,” said Simon.

Jenna nodded. She looked Morris in the eye and said, “**Speeke, Rattus Rattus.**”

At the sound of the **Speeke**, a swarm of goose bumps ran over Morris, sending the hairs on the scruff of his neck standing up on end. He took a big breath and repeated what he had squeaked. This time the Queen understood.

“Your destination is the Wizard Tower,” she told him. “The recipient of your message is the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Septimus Heap. Message begins: Septimus, **Activate** the Castle **Alert**. Extreme danger. Please be present for Queen’s Crisis Council at the Palace at six tomorrow morning. Jenna.”

Morris’s jaw dropped. He caught Stanley’s disapproving glance and shut his mouth at once—a Message Rat must show no reaction to a message, whatever its content. He waited until he was sure the Queen had finished and then said, “Message received and understood, Your Majesty.”

Stanley watched Morris hop down and scurry away into the Long Walk. He felt proud of his ratlet—but frightened for him too. He struggled to his painful feet and the next thing he knew, he had been scooped up and cradled in the Queen’s arms. “But you, Stanley,” she told him firmly, “are not going anywhere. I will make you up a bed by the fire.” Stanley closed his eyes in utter bliss. If he died now, he thought, he would be happy.

“I’ll be off now,” Simon said.

“It’s dangerous out there, Si.” Jenna sounded worried. “Stay here the night.”

“Thank you, Jen,” Simon said, “but I must get back to Lucy.” He lowered his voice. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. There are a few **Darke** tricks I have up my sleeve.”

“Simon!” Jenna sounded shocked.

“Needs must,” said Simon. Careful not to squash the rat, he gave her a hug. “I’ll see you first thing in the morning.”

“Give Lucy my love,” Jenna said. “Tell her we’re going to get William back.”

“I will.” Simon headed for the Palace doors, where the ghost of a one-armed knight who guarded the door saluted smartly. “Good luck, Heap,” he said.

“Thank you, Sir Hereward,” Simon replied as he let himself out into the night. “I’m going to need it.”

MORRIS

Of all Stanley's four foster ratlets, Morris knew the Castle the best. As soon as the ratlets had been old enough to go off on their own, Stanley had given each one a map and told them to run the Castle until they knew the place with their eyes closed. Morris had been the only one to do this literally. It had earned him a few bumps and bruises, but now his hard work had paid off. Scurrying through pipes, over rooftops, along the tops of walls and even, at one point, hurtling down a playground helter-skelter, Morris made his way steadily toward the Wizard Tower. The rat-runs kept him safe, but not all of them joined up, and every now and then Morris was forced out into the open. He was crossing the mouth of Measel's Ope, which, like all alleys that led off Wizard Way, was lit at its entrance by two large lanterns, and was running through the pool of light when he smelled snake and dead dog.

Morris was so scared that he didn't know where his feet were. He stared at the huge white shape that loomed out of the mist above him. He saw the flat snakehead dart down and as the cavern of the mouth loomed over him, Morris let out a high-pitched rat scream. The Garmin flinched—the creatures had sensitive ears—and its mouth snapped shut and Morris felt a terrible pain. And then he was free, running, running, running across the alley, diving into the pipe in the wall that went through to the Wizard Tower courtyard. Morris felt light-headed with excitement as he realized he had escaped, that he would be able to deliver his first, and probably his most important, message ever. He reached the foot of one of the massive buttresses of the Wizard Tower and scrambled into the rat tube. The tube was steep and winding and as he clambered up it, Morris began to feel oddly tired. He forced himself on and at last pushed open the rat flap and fell out into the fuzz of nighttime lights of the Great Hall. Morris was far too dizzy to notice that the floor of the Wizard Tower was flashing on and off with the words: *MESSAGE RAT! MESSAGE RAT! MESSAGE RAT!* He got to his feet and leaned against the wall, his head spinning.

In the distance Morris saw blurry figures in blue looming above. He heard a voice say, “Yuck—look at the blood.”

Another said, “Quick, pick it up and get the message. Before it’s too late.”

“*You* pick it up,” was the reply.

Someone grabbed his scruff between finger and thumb and Morris found himself being lifted dizzily high into an achingly bright light. A face not bothering to conceal an expression of disgust loomed in at him and a booming voice filled his ears. **“Speeke, Rattus Rattus.”**

With a huge effort, Morris **Spoke**. “First, I have to ask, are you Septimus Heap, ExtraOrdinary Wizard?”

The person holding him turned around and Morris felt the world spin out of control. “Get the EOW!” his holder yelled. “Fast, before the rat pegs it.”

Morris was floating. Sparkling lights spun around his head, fuzzy noise filled his ears and then, after what seemed to him to be many hours later, something purple filled the space in front of him. A voice from far, far away said, “I am Septimus Heap: ExtraOrdinary Wizard. What is your message?”

Gathering all his remaining strength, Morris **Spoke**. Then, message delivered, Morris collapsed.

In a lonely window in the Rat Office, three young rats stared out into the night. The distant tinny chimes of the Drapers Yard Clock drifted through the still night air. *Ting . . . Ting . . . Ting.*

“Something awful has happened,” said Florence. “I just know it.”

FLORENCE

Tod was woken just before dawn by an upside-down rat banging outside on the porthole. She thought she was still dreaming, but Nicko's voice told her otherwise.

"Morning, Tod! Welcome to the Castle communication system," he said. "You've got a Message Rat. Come up on deck."

Tod tumbled out of her bunk and scrambled up the ladder. A small brown rat was shivering and looking anxiously at the Night Ullr, who was sitting on guard in the prow.

"You have to say, '**Speeke, Rattus Rattus,**'" Nicko told Tod. "Then it will tell you the message."

"It *talks*?" Tod was amazed.

"Message Rats do, yes. In fact, some Message Rats never *stop* talking," Nicko said with a smile.

Tod was intrigued. "**Speeke, Rattus Rattus,**" she said.

The rat spoke in a thin, high voice. "First, I have to ask, are you Alice TodHunter Moon?"

"Yes, I am."

"Ask it what the message is," said Nicko.

"What is your message, please?" said Tod.

"Message begins: Alice, there is a Queen's Crisis Council meeting at the Palace at six this morning. I know you want to go home, but because of your knowledge of the Garmin, the Queen wishes you to be there. Alice, please do go. Ask Nicko and Snorri to take you. And, oh, Alice, I would be so happy if you would reconsider your decision to leave. Your homesickness will pass and there is so much for you here. You have great **Magykal** potential. And I will miss you very much. Love, Dandra. Message ends."

Tod was more than a little relieved at the message. After her bad attack of homesickness the previous day in the Wizard Tower, she had been surprised when Nicko and Snorri had agreed to take her home so soon. She

had then spent the evening on the *Adventurer* feeling sad about leaving Dandra Draa. Tod had hardly slept that night, she had felt so wretched. It seemed that wherever she lived now she would be missing people she loved. By the early hours of the morning, Tod had realized that she wanted to stay with Dandra—all she had needed to know was that she could go home if she wanted to. “Thank you very much,” she happily told the rat.

“You’re welcome,” the rat replied. It lingered uncertainly. “Excuse me,” it squeaked. “I hope you don’t mind. This is not part of the message and I know that I shouldn’t really use the **Speeke** for anything else but . . . oh *dear*.” The rat sat down and put its paws over its face.

Tod kneeled down beside it. “What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Something awful has happened to my brother. And my dad. They went to the Palace on a message last night and they never came back. Please, please, could you ask the Palace people if they know what happened?”

“Of course I will,” Tod promised.

“Oh, thank you,” said the rat. “Thank you so much. I’m Florence. If you find anything out, please get a message to the Rat Office. I . . . oh, I’d be so grateful.” With that, the rat jumped off the boat and Tod watched it scuttle away through the boatyard.

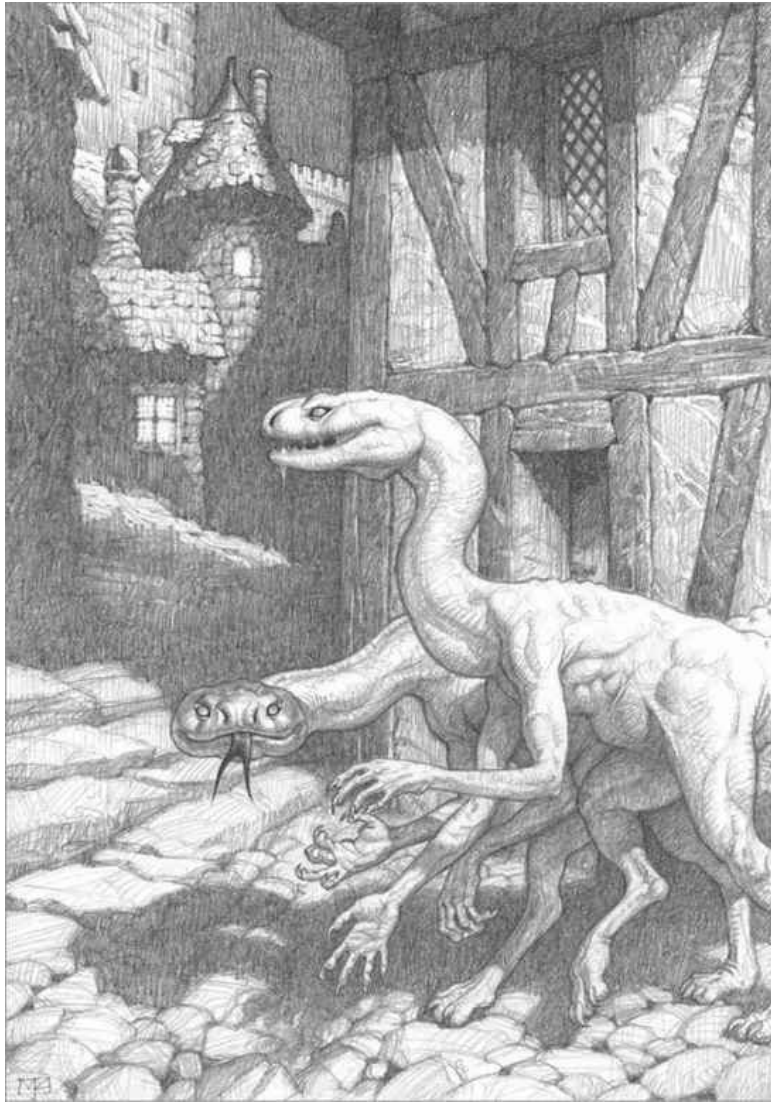
The sun rose over the Castle rooftops, and in the prow of the *Adventurer*, the Night Ullr **Transformed** into the Day Ullr. A few minutes later, Tod, Nicko, Snorri and a small orange cat walked down Wizard Way, heading quickly for the Palace. At the entrance to Measel’s Ope, Tod stopped. She recognized the dead-dog scent of Garmin.

“What is it, Tod?” Snorri asked.

“Garmin,” Tod said. “They’ve been here.”

“Here?” Nicko looked shocked.

As they walked toward the Palace, bathed pink in the light of the rising sun, everything seemed so quiet and peaceful. But Tod remembered the burning remains of her village, the wreck of her house stinking of Garmin, and she felt suddenly afraid. Suppose it was *her* who had led the Garmin to the Castle?



PART X

TOGETHER AGAIN

Tod was the first to arrive for the Queen's Council. Nicko and Snorri left her sitting in a quiet corner of the Palace ballroom, talking to Queen Jenna. The Queen asked her to tell her all she knew about the Ancient Ways and Garmin. Tod knew little about the Ways and there was not a lot she wanted to say about the Garmin. Jenna made notes as she talked, although Tod noticed that when she began to talk about what had happened to her village, Jenna's pen stopped moving and she kept glancing up at the ballroom doors. Soon the Queen excused herself. She left Tod eating toasted sweet Palace buns while she joined the Chief Hermetic Scribe—an impressive sight in his dark-blue-and-gold robes—and waited for new arrivals.

The early-morning sun began to stream through the tall windows of the ballroom, sprinkling squares of color from tiny pieces of stained glass across the polished wooden floor, and through the ancient wavy panes Tod could see the dew-covered Palace lawns sweeping down to the misty river. Her fear of the Garmin evaporated in the beauty of the morning and Tod was thankful that she was not now on her way home. She looked at the opulent surroundings—the long white-clothed table piled high with anything one could possibly wish for breakfast; the delicate little red-and-gold chairs scattered around the room in groups; the deeply luxurious red velvet armchairs—and began to appreciate what a big and varied world it was outside the PathFinder village. A buzz of excitement came over her, which was swiftly followed by a wave of guilt—where were Oskar and Ferdie now? Certainly not anywhere as comfortable as this. She had deserted her friends just when they needed her most. What was it her father used to call people who behaved like that? A “fair-weather friend,” that was it. The sweet Palace bun turned sour in her mouth and Tod put down her plate. She felt sick.

Tod watched Marcia and Alther come in. They exchanged a few words with Jenna and wandered over to join her. To Tod's relief they sat and

chatted like the old friends they were, leaving her to her thoughts. Occasionally Tod sneaked a look at Alther just to see him floating a few inches above the arm of the chair. Once he caught her eye and winked.

The white-and-gold double doors to the ballroom opened once again and Tod saw the ExtraOrdinary Wizard walk in with the Snow Princess hanging on his arm. Behind them followed a neat little man with orange hair and thick spectacles. Tod watched the Queen greet them.

“We meet again,” Jenna said. She held out her hand to the Snow Princess, who took it with a limp, cool grasp.

“So we do,” Princess Driffa replied, her gaze flicking away from Jenna and traveling around the ballroom. “You have a pleasant little Palace here, Queen Jenna. Tiny, yet quite *charming*. In its own way.”

Falling back on her Queen training, Jenna managed a smile through gritted teeth. “How kind,” she replied. Then she greeted Septimus with a formal “Good morning, ExtraOrdinary Wizard.”

Septimus returned it in kind. “Good morning, Your Grace,” he replied. “Good morning, Chief Hermetic Scribe. May I introduce to you Mr. Benhira-Benhara Gula-Gula?”

Jenna raised her eyebrows at Septimus. “Oh?” she said.

“I will explain,” Septimus said apologetically.

Mr. Benhira-Benhara Gula-Gula held out his hand to Jenna, who took it gracefully and then found that the Gula-Gula was unwilling to let go. At last, after some interminable small talk, Jenna managed to excuse herself, leaving Beetle to carry on the conversation. It took her five long minutes in the washroom to scrub away the stickiness.

Jenna returned to her business of talking to people and making notes. Every now and then she cast an irritated glance at the huge gold-and-blue clock at the end of the ballroom—affectionately known as the Pumpkin Clock for as long as anyone could remember. Now, due to Jenna’s repairing and refurbishment of the Palace, the clock no longer always pointed to twelve but told the correct time: twenty-seven minutes past six. Jenna began to pace impatiently.

“Who do you think Jenna’s waiting for?” Alther whispered to Marcia.

“Don’t ask me, Alther,” muttered Marcia. “No one tells me anything now. Mind you, that’s no different. Aha, this must be whoever-it-is now.”

The big white-and-gold doors opened.

“Gosh,” said Marcia. “I wonder what Lucy Heap has to do with all this? And Simon, too. And who are those children—Tod, whatever is the matter?”

Tod had leaped up with a yell. And then, before Marcia could stop her—for it was not the thing to interrupt the Queen when she was welcoming visitors—Tod had broken into a run and was shouting out, “Oskie! Ferdie! Oh, it’s you. It’s *you!*” And a moment later a huddle of young PathFinders were hugging one another and jumping up and down as if they were on springs.

QUEEN'S COUNCIL

The Queen's Council Room was a small, dark paneled chamber upstairs near the Throne Room. It contained an old round table with twelve ancient oak stools—uncomfortable enough to encourage quick decisions. All the places were taken, and as Queen Jenna took the last seat, she surveyed the strange mixture of humans, ghost and **ShapeShifter** gathered that morning. Sitting on her right was the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and next to him was the annoying Snow Princess, who was inspecting her long blue nails and already looking bored. Next to her was the sticky Mr. Grula-Grula, then Simon and Lucy, both hollow-eyed and pale. Then came the two PathFinder kids who had turned up with Simon and Lucy, then Tod, Marcia, Alther and back to Beetle, seated on her left.

Jenna was nervous. She had been Queen for seven years and had never had anything particularly important to do. But now the Castle was in peril and this was a huge test. She dared not fail. Jenna coughed a little anxiously and began to speak. “Welcome to you all. Last night my brother Simon came to tell me some shocking things. The Castle is under a grave threat and one of our Castle people, William Heap, is in imminent danger. From my conversations both last night and this morning, I understand that our troubles stem from a sorcerer named Oraton-Marr.” Jenna glanced over at Marcia. “That is his name?”

“It is,” Marcia confirmed.

“Many months ago,” Jenna continued, “this Oraton-Marr arrived in Princess Driffa's homeland—the Eastern SnowPlains—and began to desecrate a sacred site by digging for, the Princess believes, an . . . er . . . *egg.*”

Some amused glances were exchanged around the table.

“A mythical sacred egg from a mythical worm that makes lapis lazuli.”

“The Egg of the Orm is not mythical,” Driffa said indignantly. “It is real.”

“Princess Driffa,” Jenna said icily, “please keep your comments until after I have finished.” Princess Driffa raised her delicate white eyebrows in exasperation and Jenna continued. “Mythical or not, Oraton-Marr has been abducting people—sometimes whole villages—to use as labor to dig for this egg. This would not affect us but for the fact that through the system of Ancient Ways, our Castle is linked to the very place where he is digging. I heard last night that William Heap, who we feared had drowned, has in fact been taken by those serving Oraton-Marr. And I also heard that two nights ago Garmin abducted our guest here, Alice TodHunter Moon, from the Wizard Tower courtyard.”

“No!” gasped Ferdie. All eyes turned to Tod, and she stared stonily down at the table. She didn’t want to think about that night ever again.

“Luckily, they were intercepted,” Jenna said. She looked at Septimus disapprovingly. “Although, ExtraOrdinary Wizard, no one thought to tell me.”

Septimus looked nettled. “It was Wizard Tower business, Jenna. I mean, Queen Jenna. What happens in the Wizard Tower stays in the Wizard Tower.”

“Not when it affects the well-being of the Castle,” Jenna said severely. She turned to Lucy. “Unfortunately the ExtraOrdinary Wizard is not the only person here who has been keeping secret matters of threat to the Castle. Is he, Lucy Heap?”

“I had no choice,” Lucy said, her voice trembling.

“We all have a choice,” said Jenna. “You could have come to me and told me what was happening but you chose not to. Instead you deceived us all—including your husband—and went running off to help this servant of Oraton-Marr.”

Everyone looked at Lucy in shock.

“No!” Lucy was aghast. “No, it wasn’t like that. Please, it *wasn’t*.”

“That’s enough, Jenna,” said Simon, angrily getting to his feet.

“Sit down, Simon,” Jenna said. “I will not be interrupted. Our ex-ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Madam Marcia Overstrand, has access to the recently discovered Ancient Ways. *She* has kept me informed about these at every stage.” Jenna smiled at her new stepmother—Marcia had been unexpectedly considerate in the past year.

“Now, Lucy tells me that she has been given a choice by this servant of Oraton-Marr. She must provide twenty people from the Castle to dig for this

egg or her son will die.”

Lucy began to sob.

“I’m sorry to be so blunt,” Jenna said. “But I have to make things clear. How long do we have until this threat is carried out?”

“Seventeen hours,” Lucy replied bleakly.

“So.” Jenna stopped and looked around the table, aware that all eyes were upon her. “I believe our only chance of saving William and indeed keeping the Castle safe from future invasions of Garmin, and whatever other creatures this Oraton-Marr has at his disposal, is to beard the lion in his den. We must go into the Ancient Ways and, with the help of our talented team of Wizards, we must, er . . . remove him. I see no other option. We must act at once. Today. If we do not, William Heap will die.”

Simon clutched Lucy’s hand so tightly that his knuckles were white.

“If we do not do this,” Jenna said somberly, “we, too, will become slaves to this evil Wizard. We have no choice. Does anyone disagree?”

There was silence around the table. No one disagreed.

“Any questions?”

“There is one big problem,” said Marcia. “We know that Oraton-Marr is at the Heart of the Ways, but we do not know how to get there. We could end up anywhere in the world at all.”

“Forgive me, Marcia, for leaving this until last,” Jenna said. “I wanted to make sure I had all the facts before I asked Mr. Grula-Grula to speak.” She turned to the little man with spectacles, who was gazing at her in admiration. “Fair Grula-Grula, I pray you tell us your wisdom.”

The Grula-Grula gave an apologetic cough and launched into a high, rapid monotone. “I, Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula, greet you. I wish you nothing but well, my friends, for you have treated me most respectfully. I fled to your great Castle when our Heart of the Ways was overrun by Garmin. This was a day of despair for all Grulas, for many were hunted and killed by the Garmin as sport. We Grula understand the Ways. We know how to switch and change, how to twist and turn, duck and dive; we know the Ways of the World. And so I came to safety in your beautiful Castle. I found myself on a perilous ledge beside some water and I fell in. But just in time I **ShapeShifted** into a small duck. After swimming for a while my feathers became itchy, and I came onto the land and **ShapeShifted** into human form. In this guise I entered an establishment selling cloaks. Unfortunately I became trapped by some kind of ancient **Magyk** in one of

the cloaks and was rendered helpless. I lay among these ancient cloaks becoming ever more desperate until Mr. O. Beetle”—here, the Grula-Grula bowed his head and Beetle returned the compliment—“tried to assist me in my sad predicament. But even his wisdom was not enough for the ancient **Magyk** in which I found myself ensnared. But when this most *ExtraOrdinary* of Wizards”—the Grula-Grula bowed to Septimus, who bowed in return—“attended me, the **Magyk** was vanquished and I was able to return to my desired state. I was treated with such hospitality and such politeness. It is my great pleasure to place myself at your disposal as a guide through the Ways in your time of trouble. I, Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula, will take you to the Sorcerer Oraton-Marr.” The little man closed his mouth tightly shut in an oddly mechanical fashion and bowed his head.

“Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula, we thank you and accept your most benevolent and generous offer.” Jenna turned to the rest of the table. “Thank you, everyone. Does anyone have anything they wish to add?”

Marcia spoke. “I suggest we all **Go Through** to my Keep at once. We need to make a detailed plan on how we are going to confront Oraton-Marr. And there are a few points of **Magyk** I would like to clarify before Mr. Grula-Grula kindly leads us through to the Heart of the Ways.”

“Thank you, Marcia,” Jenna said. She got to her feet. “This meeting is ended. There is not a moment to lose.”

Everyone stood up and began to file out of the room. Tod, Ferdie and Oskar stayed sitting at the table.

“But no one said *anything* about our village,” Ferdie said in a low voice.

“It was all about this Castle,” said Oskar. “It was all about *them*.”

“I don’t think they meant it to be,” said Tod.

“How do you know?” Oskar demanded.

“Well . . . I think it just sounded like that. They are really nice here.” Tod trailed off, realizing she was convincing neither Ferdie nor Oskar.

“The Queen wasn’t very nice to Lucy,” Ferdie said.

Tod felt sad, sensing that a gulf had opened up between them. “I’m sure they really care about our village too.”

“Are you?” asked Oskar. “Why?”

Tod didn’t have an answer.

ULLR

Nicko and Snorri were waiting for Tod in the Palace Entrance Hall. When at last, after everyone had come down, they saw her appear at the top of the stairs, there were two familiar figures beside her. “It is Ferdie!” Snorri gasped. “And Oskar!”

“It can’t be,” said Nicko. And then, “Great Neptune, it is! How did *they* get here?”

As the group from the Queen’s Council—minus Alther and the Queen herself—hurried back along Wizard Way, Tod, Ferdie and Oskar lagged behind with Nicko and Snorri. Ferdie and Oskar were gazing in amazement at the wide, paved street with its silver torch posts glinting in the early-morning sunlight. They had never seen so many different shops before. They were entranced by every single one, but each time they stopped, Tod hurried them on, much to their annoyance. As Tod caught up with Nicko and Snorri from yet another Ferdie and Oskar retrieval, Nicko inquired with a smile, “So you’re not wanting a berth home today?”

Tod smiled sheepishly. “Oh, Nicko. Snorri. Thank you. It was so wonderful to know that I could go home if I wanted to. But now that Ferdie and Oskar are here it feels so different. And besides, we have to go and rescue everyone from that horrible sorcerer.”

Snorri did not think Tod was taking the “horrible sorcerer” seriously enough. “Tod,” she said. “This is dangerous work. I am surprised that Septimus is allowing you to go.”

“But we *have* to go,” Tod said. “He has kidnapped our village.” She caught sight of Oskar staring into a shop window full of automata. “’S’cuse me,” she said, and she ran off to drag the unwilling Oskar back to the fold.

Snorri and Nicko exchanged anxious looks. “They are too young for this,” Snorri said. “It is very dangerous.”

“It is,” Nicko agreed. “But I don’t think you should worry. Tod didn’t actually say that Septimus *was* allowing them to go. Frankly, I can’t see him letting them walk into this kind of danger. Septimus has become surprisingly sensible now that he’s ExtraOrdinary Wizard.”

Snorri grinned. “Septimus always *was* sensible, Nicko. Unlike you.”

“Me? I am just about the most sensible person here,” Nicko said with a grin. He put his arm around Snorri. “Apart from you, of course.”

Tod was the last to **Go Through** Way VII. As she waited with Nicko and Snorri, Tod suddenly remembered Florence.

“Snorri, could you please take a message to that little rat? I asked Queen Jenna and she said that Florence’s father is safe at the Palace, but her brother was injured—he lost his arm. Or I suppose it’s a foreleg with a rat. Anyway, he’s being cared for in the Wizard Tower Sick Bay.”

Snorri picked up Ullr and scratched behind his ears. Ullr purred. “First I will take Ullr back to the boat and *then* I will go to the Rat Office,” she said. “That will save a lot of fuss, I think.”

The Way VII arch began to glow purple, and a moment later, Marcia came striding out to collect Tod. Tod felt sad to be leaving Snorri and Nicko. “Good-bye,” she said. “And thank you . . . for *everything*.”

Snorri gulped. The way Tod had spoken made it sound like a final farewell. Snorri had become very fond of Tod; there was something about her that reminded Snorri of herself at that age. As Tod turned to go, Snorri called out, “Tod! Wait a moment.” She hurried over to her and pushed the little orange cat into Tod’s arms. “Take Ullr. He will look after you. Tell him, ‘Komme, Ullr,’ and he will follow you. Anywhere.”

“Oh!” Tod gasped. “Oh . . . I . . . oh, thank you!” And then she turned and ran into Way VII.

“Tod!” Marcia yelled, hurrying after her. “Wait! Wait for me!”

As the purple glow faded and the arch of Way VII blended back into the white marble, Nicko looked at Snorri. “You gave her Ullr,” he murmured, a little stunned.

“I had to give her some help, Nicko,” Snorri said. “Because I think she will go to rescue her people, whatever Septimus says.”

“Yes. I think you may be right,” said Nicko. He linked his arm through Snorri’s and together they walked slowly over to the Rat Office.

BREAK AWAY

An hour later in Marcia's Keep, Tod—with a small orange cat in her arms—was perched on a high stool in a small book-lined room set inside the thick walls that Marcia used as her study. Tod was amazed to have been asked to sit in on such a **Magykal** and serious conversation. Septimus and Marcia were having a last-minute strategy discussion. Fast and full of **Magykal** shorthand, their talk was breathtaking to listen to. It was exhilarating, and any other time, Tod would have been thrilled to be there. But right then it was bittersweet, because Tod had seen Oskar's expression as she had followed Marcia and Septimus up the tiny stairs that led to the study. And she knew exactly what the look had meant: *You've gone over to the other side, Tod.*

Marcia and Septimus were discussing Oraton-Marr's possible weak points—of which there seemed to be very few. Marcia sighed. "We could do with Alther." She looked at her timepiece. "He should be here soon. It's only about half an hour at the rate he flies. I've never seen a ghost whiz along so fast." She turned to Tod and asked, "Would you mind going down and waiting for Alther? And bring him up here as soon as he arrives?"

Tod tucked Ullr under her arm and slipped out of the room. She hurried down the stairs to the main hall, where Ferdie and Oskar were sitting by the fire, and gave them a smile. Ferdie responded but Oskar looked away. Suddenly, from the Fire Pit below, an argument erupted between Lucy and Simon.

"Of *course* I'm coming," Lucy was yelling. "I'm his mother, for goodness' sake!"

There were some low, soothing rumblings from both Milo and Simon followed by Lucy yelling, "No way!"

More calming noises followed and then Lucy yelled, "Just you try and stop me. Just you try!" There was the sound of boots pounding up the stairs and Lucy appeared in the doorway, her face streaked with tears, her eyes wild. Ferdie pushed past Tod and hurried over to Lucy.

“Won’t they let you go to find William?” Ferdie asked.

“They are being so *stupid*,” Lucy said furiously. “Milo and Simon are saying only the men are going. They’re planning some kind of battle. It’s *ridiculous*.”

“But Marcia’s going,” Tod said.

“Oh yes, they’ll *allow* Marcia to come,” Lucy said, “because of her **Magyk**. But this is ‘a *serious* expedition’ and she’s not going to be allowed to wear her shoes.”

“Well, *that’s* not going to happen,” said Tod.

“It’s like they’ve taken over everything,” said Lucy. “And they are spending so long *talk-talk-talking* about strategy and equipment, and every minute that goes by is another minute we won’t get back. And neither will William. And Marcia’s just as bad, she’s up there with Septimus doing the same thing, I’ll bet: *talk, talk, talk*.” Lucy threw herself down into one of the chairs beside the fire. “Oh,” she wailed, “I don’t know what to *doooo*.”

“I know what to do,” said Ferdie.

Lucy looked up in surprise. Ferdie sounded so sure. So calm.

“We’ll go anyway,” said Ferdie. “We’ll go right now. We’ll go and we will find your William, and Mum and Dad and Torr and all our friends.”

Oskar grinned. “And I’ll bet we’ll bring them back before anyone has even a chance to notice we’ve gone.”

“Oh, Ferdie, Oskar,” Lucy said sadly. “It’s not that simple. Nothing ever is, believe me.”

Tod stepped in. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s simple or not. Sometimes you have to do what you feel is right.” She looked at Ferdie and Oskar. “Even if no one else understands.”

Oskar looked surprised.

Lucy frowned at the fire, thinking hard. “But there’s one big problem,” she said. “How do we get to the right place?”

“With the Grula-Grula,” said Oskar. “He knows the way. All you have to do is ask him nicely.”

“But he’s downstairs with Simon and Milo,” Lucy said glumly. “And he thinks they are *wonderful*.”

Tod remembered how the **PathFinder** always tapped inside its lapis box when she went through Way VII. She remembered what Dan had said at the Circle. And suddenly she understood. “I can find the Way,” she said.

“How?” asked Lucy and Ferdie together.

Tod took the lapis box from her pocket. She opened it and brought out the **PathFinder**. “With this,” she said.

Lucy frowned. The arrow looked more like a piece of jewelry than a compass. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Tod. “I am. I’m sure.”

There was something about Tod’s steady gaze, about the way she considered her reply, that made Lucy say, “Okay. Let’s go.”

On the way down, Lucy stopped off at the kitchen, where the Grula-Grula was contentedly eating his way through a pile of little iced cakes. She grabbed a fur jacket. William was not going to be cold a moment longer than she could help it.

“Hey, Lu!” Simon protested.

Lucy blew him a kiss. “Sorry!” she said with a gulp, then she turned and raced down the steps to the Hub.

Simon and Milo looked at each other, puzzled. Simon shrugged. “It’s this thing with William. It’s getting to her. Poor Lu.” He looked at the pile of baggage arranged along the wall, bristling with swords, knives, bows and arrows and not a few cooking pots. “Milo, do you think we’ll be able to carry all that?” he asked.

“We’ll put it all on the Princess’s horse,” said Milo. “It’s about time that animal did something to earn its keep.”

The Princess’s horse was not the kind of horse *anyone* put baggage on. Pure white, with wicked blue eyes, the horse had attitude. It was a Royal Horse and expected to be treated as such. Horses of such status did not get left in a smelly underground chamber for days on end with a servant who had the cheek to complain about cleaning up after them. It was an honor to wield the Royal Horse shovel. There was no doubt in the Royal Horse’s mind that it was slumming. Its owner, who was grooming the Royal Horse, felt much the same. Princess Driffa had expected to be welcomed at the Palace with great ceremony, but all she had got was a buffet breakfast with a group of common people, a boring meeting and some snide remarks from the Queen. Even the handsome ExtraOrdinary Wizard was turning out to be a bit of a disappointment, she thought as she vigorously brushed the Royal Horse’s mane. She had expected to be included in the high-powered discussion going on in the study and instead she had been dismissed as if she were an annoying child. Her angry brush caught a snarl in the Royal Horse’s pure

white mane and the Royal Horse threw its head back. Driffa was sent flying into the straw, which the servant of the Royal Horse had neglected to renew that morning.

Lucy arrived in the Hub just in time to help Driffa to her feet. She brushed the straw off Driffa's now-somewhat-grubby white pantaloons. "There," Lucy said soothingly. "That's the worst of it off. You'll be wanting a bath, though."

The Princess looked shocked. No one spoke to her like that. *No one*. She was about to tell Lucy to keep to her place when she realized no one was listening. They had gathered around Tod and were looking at something. Driffa was not someone who liked secrets being kept from her, and this looked suspiciously like one. She pushed Oskar aside and saw Tod holding the PathFinder arrow, which was gently turning on its sphere.

"A **PathFinder** compass!" she cried. "Where did you steal that from?"

Tod's eyes blazed with anger. "This belongs to me. *This* is my inheritance. My father gave it to me. It was his father's before him." She remembered Dan's words in the Circle and decided that she would have to tell a little bit of the secret. But not the big, important part about the gills—*that* she would never tell. "My people have great skills navigating what were called the Ancient Ways," she said. "For this we are revered and called PathFinders."

Princess Driffa stepped back, astonished. "You are from the mythical PathFinder tribe?"

"I am a PathFinder," Tod said coldly. "And we are not mythical." She turned away from Driffa. "Ready?" she asked Lucy, Ferdie and Oskar.

Ferdie and Oskar looked dumbstruck—how did Tod know this stuff?

"Ready, Tod," they said meekly.

But Lucy shook her head. "Tod, how do you know where to go?"

"This will show me," said Tod.

"Okay, I get that. But what I mean is, does the **PathFinder** thingy know you want to go to the Eastern SnowPlains?"

The confidence drained from Tod. She hadn't thought of that. She was about to admit defeat, when Driffa stepped in.

"That," Princess Driffa told Lucy snappily, "is a very stupid question. It doesn't *know*. You have to *show* it where you want to go."

"How?" Lucy retorted. With some difficulty, she resisted adding *Miss Princess Fancy-Pants Know-It-All*.

It seemed to Tod that Driffa knew something useful about the **PathFinder**. “Princess Driffa,” Tod said quickly—before Lucy could annoy Driffa any more—“please, do you know how to show the **PathFinder** where to go?”

Driffa turned her back on Lucy and addressed Tod. “I do. I know this because we have a **PathFinder** in the Ancient Artifact room in my palace. It is so precious that it lives beneath a glass dome and we are not allowed to touch it. We learn about these ancient **Magykal Charms** when we are children. We were told that you must touch the **PathFinder** to something from the earth of the place you wish to go.”

Tod looked at her in despair. “But I don’t have anything.”

Princess Driffa smiled. “But I do.” She held out her hand to show her big blue stone ring. “This is lapis from our **Enchanted** Blue Pinnacle. It will guide you to the Heart of the Ways.”

Tod looked at the beautiful lapis streaked with gold and she knew that Driffa spoke the truth. “Thank you,” she said.

The Princess put her hands behind her back. “*If* you let me come with you,” she said.

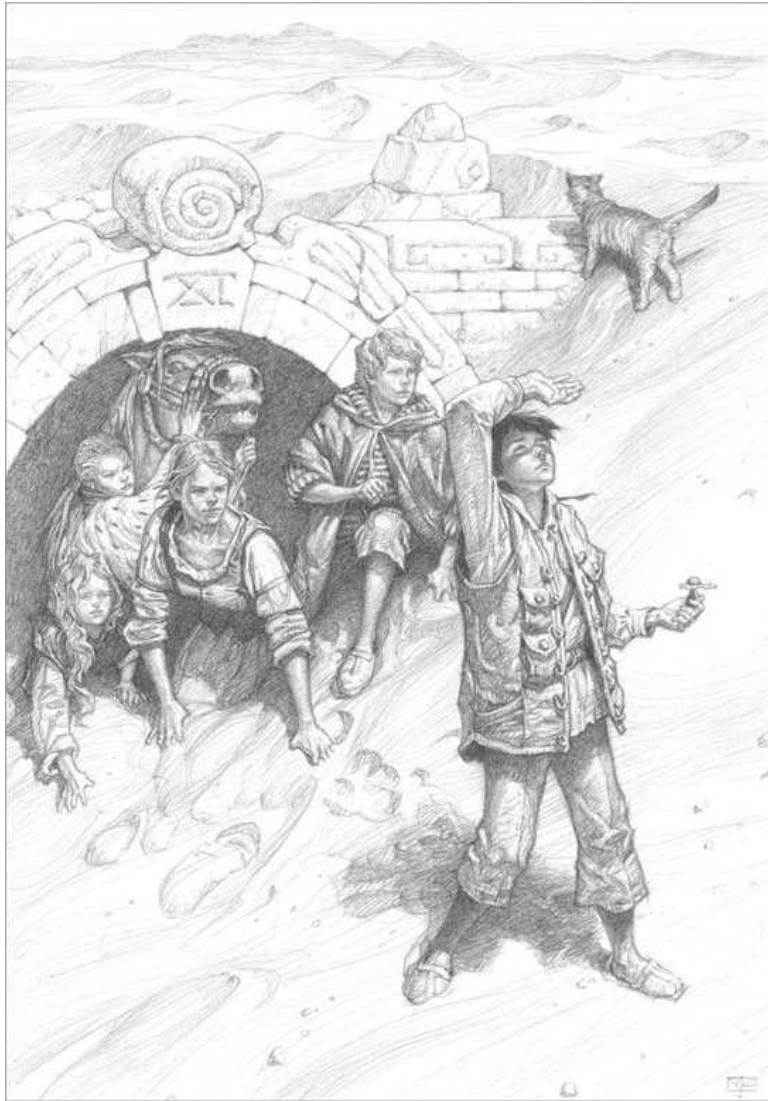
Tod knew she had no choice. “All right,” she said.

“And my horse,” said Driffa.

Tod sighed. “Okay. *And* your horse.”

Princess Driffa took off her lapis ring and handed it to Tod. Tod touched the tip of the PathFinder arrow to it and the arrow swung around and pointed to the arch with *XI* inscribed into the keystone.

“It’s right so far,” said Tod, remembering the broken **Seal** hanging down from Way *XI* after Driffa had smashed through it. She turned to Ferdie, Oskar and Lucy. “We should hold on to each other,” she said. “So we stay together.” They formed a chain of hands and Driffa took hold of the Royal Horse’s bridle. Tod knew that she was going to have to trust what Snorri had told her—that Ullr would follow her anywhere. She placed the little cat onto the floor and said, “Komme, Ullr.” Then, holding the **PathFinder** in her right hand and Oskar’s hand in her left, Tod took a deep breath and stepped into Way *XI*.



PART XI

PATHFINDING

As Lucy walked through arch XI, she remembered how a ribbon had led Tod and Oskar to Ferdie. She let go of Ferdie's hand for a moment, pulled a ribbon from her sleeve and dropped it at the entrance to the Way so that Simon would see where she had gone.

"Okay?" Tod called from the front.

"Yes. Sorry!" said Lucy. She took hold of Ferdie's hand and once more they set off into the tunnel.

Tod went forward, feeling the pull of everyone behind her. She had never had so many people depending on her before—but it felt right. Tod, who hated the cramped earthen burrows beneath her village, realized that these beautiful tunnels with their flashes of blue and gold veined through the stone were somewhere she felt at home. Confidently, she held the **PathFinder** out before her and walked slowly toward the **Vanishing Point**. When she reached the swirling, eerie white mist Tod halted and looked back at the chain of people—and one horse—behind her. "Okay?" she asked.

There were nervous murmurs of assent and the Royal Horse gave a snort.

"Let's go." Tod took a deep breath and stepped into the mist. With a suddenness that made her jump, a stream of light poured from the **PathFinder**. It enveloped her in a silver bubble and as each person walked through the **Vanishing Point**, the bubble expanded to encase them, too. Another step . . . another . . . Tod went ever deeper into the mist, which swirled outside the silvery skin of light that surrounded her. She wondered how she would know when everyone was through the **Vanishing Point**, but she dared not look around—her eyes were fixed on the **PathFinder**, which sat steadily on its sphere of lapis, pointing forward. But there was no mistaking the moment when at last the bubble of light closed over the tip of the Royal Horse's tail and they were all encased within. Suddenly a sensation of traveling at breakneck speed kicked in. Tod was still walking

slowly and steadily, but she felt as though the world were rushing past. This was very different from the quick trips through Way VII with Marcia—it made her head spin. Concentrating hard on the **PathFinder**, Tod watched the lapis dome shimmer in the light and the silver pointer move sedately on its gimbal: up and down, a little to the left, a little to the right—as the Way took them.

Before long Tod realized she could see the dark shape of an archway ahead. A moment later she was walking out of the **Vanishing Point**, leaving the silver bubble behind. When the Royal Horse’s tail cleared the last of the mist, the bubble disappeared with a tiny *pop* and they were plunged into darkness.

“Argh!” A loud squeal came from Lucy.

Tod knew she must stay calm. “Oskie,” she said, “have you got a light stick?”

“Yes. Can I let go of your hand?” Oskar whispered.

“Yeah, we’re out now.”

Oskar broke open his last light stick. The glow illuminated the archway before them and they walked out of the Way into a Hub full of dim greenness.

“Oh no!” cried Lucy. “This isn’t what it’s supposed to look like!” Lucy felt like a coiled spring; she could take no more setbacks. She rounded on Tod. “You’ve taken us to the wrong Hub! Oh, what are we going to *dooooo*?”

Lucy’s certainty that she had taken them through the wrong Way threw Tod. Once again, Driffa came to her rescue.

“Lucy Heap, stop fussing,” Driffa said severely. “To reach the Heart of the Ways we must pass through many different Hubs. You must trust the **PathFinder**.”

Lucy said no more; she stared around at the Hub, an expression of dismay set firmly in her face—the more Hubs they had to go through, the longer it would take to reach William.

The Hub was the same size as the one they had just left, but it was utterly derelict. Where Marcia’s scrubbed white stairs would have been was a pile of rubble. Rivulets of water ran across the earthen floor, which was scattered with small animal skeletons, probably rats. The roof was falling in, held together only by thick strands of a dark green creeper that had covered most of the stone inside. The place smelled dank and dead. It felt, Lucy thought, like a tomb.

The **PathFinder** swung around and pointed to a creeper-covered arch. While everyone pulled the vines away from the entrance to reveal the number II, Oskar checked the number of the arch they had just come out of—it was VII—and began a memory map. He wanted to be sure of getting home again, with or without the **PathFinder**.

As they walked into the next Way, Lucy pulled another ribbon from her sleeve and dropped it at the entrance. At the **Vanishing Point**, the silver light enclosed them and they set off once more in their bubble of speed.

The next Hub was very different. They were greeted by a blast of heat, and as they walked along the tunnel to the oddly small but brilliantly bright archway, sand crunched under their feet. As they reached the arch they saw why it looked so small—it was half blocked with drifting sand.

Ullr leaped lightly up onto the gap at the top of the sand and mewed encouragingly, but it took them a long half hour to dig their way out—although it would have been much less had it not been for having to get the Royal Horse out. When they eventually emerged—hot, sticky and all, bar Driffa, annoyed with the horse—the heat hit them like a hammer. They stumbled into the open and were greeted by the scorching sun high in a brilliant blue sky. The bleached white stone of the Hub intensified the light and heat so it was almost unbearable. They waded through the drifts of sand, following the **PathFinder** to the next Way. Oskar looked at the arch they had come out of and added XI to his mind map, then he helped to dig their way into the welcome cool of the next Way and its tunnel beyond.

As they traversed the Ancient Ways, a feeling of awe descended upon Tod. She began to understand that she was leading Oskar, Ferdie, Lucy and Driffa—not to mention Ullr and Nona—on a long and complex journey. She was a true PathFinder. The sense of speed within the **PathFinder**'s silver bubble was exhilarating, and each time Tod walked into another Hub, the world had changed.

Tod led them through a Hub full of small, writhing green snakes, through a Hub deep in a cave, through one covered in snow and ice, through one used as an aviary for exotic birds and one that was, to their shock, a busy market. Each was different. As were the smells: spicy, rank, fragrant, earthy. And the background sounds: sibilant whispering, distant shouts, raucous screams of birds and once, the clash of a battle not so very far away. The temperature ran from unbearably hot and humid to piercingly dry cold. Some were light, some dark, but each Hub gave Tod the thrilling

sensation that she had taken another giant stride across the world. Strangely, except for the market, all were empty of humans bar the last one, where a lone old woman sat knitting and followed the sound of hooves with wide, sightless eyes. As they went past they bade the woman hello and followed the **PathFinder** as it led them to yet another Way. Some minutes later, Tod and a small orange cat stepped into the Heart of the Ways.

THE HEART OF THE WAYS

A sudden blaze of torches bursting into flame greeted Tod and Ullr as they walked into their destination. Both human and cat stopped and gazed in wonder.

The Heart of the Ways was magnificent.

Although it was recognizably a Hub—the typical circular chamber with the twelve Ways—it was huge. About, Tod reckoned, twelve times bigger than a normal Hub. Every detail outshone all Hubs they had seen before. The entire space was carved from deep-blue lapis stone with brilliant streaks of gold. The arches that led to the Ways were built from great blocks of pale blue lapis edged with silver. The numbers incised in their keystones were inlaid with gold, and in between each Way was a burning torch set into a silver holder. These were **Magykally** primed to light whenever a **PathFinder** was brought into the Heart of the Ways.

As Tod carefully placed the **PathFinder** back into its lapis box and murmured her thanks to it for guiding them safely, she heard the *oohs*, *aahs* and wows of those emerging behind her. A *clip-clop* of hooves told Tod that the Royal Horse was out. She turned to Driffa and gave back her ring. “Thank you,” Tod said, her voice echoing eerily in the chamber.

Lucy was gazing around edgily. “So how do we get out?” she whispered.

Driffa sighed. “Lucy Heap, you fuss too much.”

Lucy turned on Driffa angrily. “My William has . . .” She looked at her timepiece. “Three more hours left of his life. *That* is why I fuss.”

Driffa colored. “Forgive me, Lucy Heap.”

Lucy nodded curtly, biting back the tears.

“The prisoners are working their way down to the Chamber of the Great Orm,” Driffa said. “Far above here.” She pointed upward to the roof, which was made from thick spirals of lapis curled up like a snake coiled asleep, and gasped in shock. “Oh! This must be the palimpsest of the Great Orm,” Driffa whispered. “I never dreamed that one day I would see this.”

“Yes, very nice,” Lucy said impatiently. “Can we get going now?”

Driffa led her horse across the chamber toward a perfectly circular hole in the lapis wall between Way I and Way XII. Oskar ran and caught up with her. “What,” he asked, “is a palimpsest?”

Excited to be home, Driffa was happy to talk. “It is the imprint of the Orm—like a fossil. The Great Orm made the Heart of the Ways and then it came up to our SnowPlain. It rested awhile, then ate its way back down through the rock, transforming it to lapis lazuli as it went, leaving us our **Enchanted** Blue Pinnacle. It hollowed out a great chamber and then burrowed down once more to make the Orm Tube. At the bottom of the Orm Tube the Great Orm laid its egg, then curled up beneath it and died. The lapis inside it became the roof of the Heart of the Ways.”

Now Oskar understood. There were worms like that in the sand at home. “Worm poo,” he said.

“Oskar, don’t be rude,” Ferdie chided, but to her surprise, Driffa agreed.

“Yes. It is the last cast of the Orm. It is very precious.”

“Where are its bones?” Oskar wanted to know.

“An Orm has no bones,” said Driffa. “An Orm is no more than a fragile tube of gold, eating its way through rock. The little flecks of gold in the blue are all that is left of it.”

As they hurried across the chamber Lucy, too, was gazing up at the coils of the Orm. But only Ferdie understood what she was thinking. “They are so close now,” she whispered.

“But so far away,” Lucy said.

As they reached the center a long, low rumble shook the walls. A sudden crack snaked along the spirals of the Orm cast and a fall of blue dust drifted down.

“Run!” Driffa cried. Tod snatched up Ullr and as they ran for cover, two dead, golden eyes looked down from the head of the Orm.

They reached the pile of blue rubble and raced past it into the passageway down which Driffa had fled the day before. As they gathered together, Driffa whispered, “This is how the Great Orm left the Heart of the Ways; it is a beautiful, curving tunnel—” She stopped. A flash of fear came into her eyes. “There’s someone coming,” she whispered.

Everyone fell silent—apart from the Royal Horse, which suddenly became spooked. It skittered its hooves and jerked its head up against the

reins. Driffa turned very, very pale. "It is *him*. It is Oraton-Marr. I know his pinky-ponky steps."

"*Pinky-ponky?*" whispered Tod.

"Yes," hissed Driffa. "The sound of the spring blades on the bottom of his stupid shoes. We have to get out of here. *Move, you silly horse.*" Driffa gave Nona a shove, but the animal would not budge.

"My William's up there," Lucy said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Neither are we," said Ferdie.

The strange metallic sound was getting ever nearer: *pink-ponk, pink-ponk.*

With a loud neigh, Driffa's horse kicked out and cantered into the Hub.

"Nona!" Driffa yelled. "Come back!"

But the Royal Horse was off, galloping across the lapis floor. Driffa wheeled around to give chase, and suddenly there was a loud *clang* and a metal grid came crashing down like a portcullis in front of her, nearly crushing her toes. She leaped back with a scream.

Their way back to the Hub was barred. There was no escape now.

Pink-ponk, pink-ponk.

"Okay," whispered Lucy. "We run at him and knock him off his feet. I mean his spring things."

"He won't be alone," muttered Driffa.

"So?" hissed Lucy. "Do you have any better ideas?"

Pink-ponk, pink-ponk.

"Let's do it," whispered Tod. "We'll all go together. One . . . two . . . three!"

They ran up the gently curving incline of the Great Orm's exit. They had traveled the first full spiral when they cannoned into another metal grid. They were trapped like rats in a cage.

Pink-ponk, pink-ponk.

ERMINTRUDE

A bright light lit up the lapis tube and suddenly, there was Oraton-Marr walking toward them. He stopped just out of arm's reach of the grille and, leaning on two long black staves, regarded his catch with satisfaction. Oraton-Marr was a slight man—physically no taller than Tod—but he towered over his captives, the reason being the pair of long spring blades he wore fixed to the soles of his pointed, purple shoes. He was resplendent in silk, and his shimmering blue cloak lined with white fur swept down to the ground, hiding the blades on his purple, pointy shoes. His steel-gray hair was cut short and his green eyes were amused as he surveyed his captives.

Behind the sorcerer stood his sword carrier, a thin bald man in black, with a servant's white ruff around his neck that gave him the look of a vulture. His job was to carry Oraton-Marr's sword and laugh at his jokes.

"Well, well. We have netted ourselves some fish," Oraton-Marr said in a high, oddly accented voice. "If I am not mistaken by the sheen on their hair, the small ones will be worth throwing in. Ha-ha."

The sword carrier laughed. "Little fish to catch the worm," he said. And then he closed his mouth in panic. He had been too clever.

Oraton-Marr's eyes narrowed. Very deliberately he said, "Give . . . me . . . my . . . sword . . . Drone." Trembling, his servant unsheathed the sword and, with a small bow, presented the hilt to his master. Oraton-Marr let go of his staves—leaving them floating unsupported in the air—and grasped the sword. Drone stood at attention and closed his eyes. He knew that whatever was going to happen next was going to be bad.

"Stop!" Driffa's voice came, strong and authoritative.

Oraton-Marr shifted his grip. "Stop what?" he inquired.

"Terrorizing your servant," said Driffa.

The sorcerer smiled as though amused by a child. "Is that not what servants are for?"

Drone, amazed to be still in one piece, dared to open an eye. He saw his master's attention was now on the stunningly white-haired captive who had

spoken out. Drone allowed himself to breathe again.

“I know you,” Oraton-Marr was saying. “You are the Snow Princess with the horse. The one who came to surrender. Well, well. I accept.”

Driffa looked indignant. “I did *not* come to surrender.”

“Why else would you have come? You’ve gotten cold feet, but what else does one expect from a Snow Princess? Ha-ha!”

“Oh, ha-ha! Oh, ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha, *ha-ha-ha!*” Drone laughed, desperately trying to make up for his previous error.

“Shut up, Drone,” snapped Oraton-Marr, his eyes still focused on Driffa. “I am so looking forward to moving into your lovely Snow Palace and to walking the fabled lantern walkways of ice. Such a wise decision of yours. A surrender does save so much bloodstaining of the snow, do you not think?”

Driffa stared at the sorcerer in dismay.

With a sudden squeak from his blades, Oraton-Marr spun around and threw his sword to Drone. The servant caught it awkwardly and cut his hand. He smothered a cry, clenched his fist to stop the blood and slid the sword back into the scabbard, praying that not a speck of blood had stained the blade.

Oraton-Marr grabbed hold of his sticks. “Open the gate, Drone,” he ordered.

Drone undid the lock and a small door in the grille swung open.

“Princess Driffa,” said Oraton-Marr. “We have the terms of your surrender to discuss. Perhaps you would care to accompany me. No? Well, maybe I can tempt you with a little show that I have arranged. All is turning out very well indeed; the roof to your Orm Chamber has just collapsed.”

“No!” cried Driffa.

The Sorcerer gave a wolfish smile. “Yes. We gave it some encouragement, of course, but it has been most obliging. The serfs are clearing the rubble and soon the entertainment will begin. Come.” Oraton-Marr offered his hand to Driffa, but she spat on the ground.

Oraton-Marr’s expression of amused tolerance changed into something nastier. “You will come *now*. You may bring your serving woman.”

Driffa looked puzzled but Lucy understood. She was desperate to get out of the cage and have a chance of finding William, and if she had to go out as a serving woman, then so be it. She curtsied to Driffa, who stared at her in amazement.

“Ma’am, I would be honored to accompany you, Your . . . er . . . Bountifulness,” Lucy murmured.

“What?” said Driffa.

“Please forgive me for saying, ma’am, for I am but a mere *servicing woman*, but we have no choice. *We must go*,” Lucy said, hoping that Driffa would understand.

Suddenly, Driffa got it. “Oh! Very well . . . er . . . Ermintrude,” she said.

Lucy opened her mouth to exclaim, *Ermintrude! Are you trying to be funny?* But Tod nudged her hard.

“What?” Lucy said crossly.

Tod put her finger to her lips. She knew that Driffa was protecting Lucy, because to give a **Darke** sorcerer a person’s real name was to give him tremendous power over her.

“Come, Ermintrude,” said Driffa.

Drone bowed to Driffa as she stepped out.

“No need to bow. She is nothing now,” Oraton-Marr snapped.

Lucy followed, trying her best to look like a demure serving woman. It did not come easily.

“Lock the cage,” Oraton-Marr instructed Drone. “Tell the guards to collect the fish. And their cat.” The sorcerer frowned. Fish . . . cat . . . There was a joke there somewhere, but he couldn’t quite think of it.

Drone laughed anyway, just to be on the safe side. “The cat! And its fish! Oh yes, indeed. Ha-ha-ha!” With blood dripping from the deep cut across his palm, the sword carrier fumbled with the lock until it clicked home.

Clutching the bars of the cage, Tod, Oskar and Ferdie watched the figures trudge up the walkway—Oraton-Marr escorting Driffa, followed by Lucy and then Drone, who left bright red spots of blood seeping into the trodden snow. The purple light disappeared around the next spiral and they were gone.

Ullr was restless. He slipped through the bars and mewed.

“Ullr,” Tod whispered. “Ullr, come back.” Ullr mewed again. The little cat crouched down and Tod suddenly understood. Far above them, the sun was setting and Ullr was about to **Transform**.

Thirty seconds later, a sleek, big black cat lay free on the other side of the bars of the cage, and Tod had a thought. “Ullr,” she said. “Go find William Heap. Keep him safe.”

Ullr's green eyes looked at Tod, but she had no way of telling if he understood or was able to do what she had asked. She watched the panther pad away up the blood-spattered incline and wondered if she had let go their only protector.

CAGED

“Sheesh,” Oskar hissed. “Just stop asking me stuff, okay? Let me *think*.”

Oskar was kneeling beside the lock, methodically twisting and pushing his lockpick, listening for the telltale click, feeling for a shift in the mechanism. The lock was complicated. Oskar had to pick through a section at a time, keeping each one open as he went—it was the most difficult thing he had ever done. Ferdie was helpfully holding a light stick for him, but she was also breathing in his ear and anxiously asking him how he was doing.

“I don’t need the light. I just need someone to stop breathing down my neck,” Oskar said snappily.

Rebuffed, Ferdie stepped back.

Ker-lunk!

“Woo-hoo!” Oskar leaped to his feet. “I’ve done it!”

“Hey, Oskie, that is *amazing*,” said Tod.

Oskar gave the door a tentative push and it swung open.

“Clever boy,” Ferdie said, forgiving Oskar his grumpiness.

“Phew,” breathed Oskar. “I thought I wasn’t going to get that one.”

They hurried up the passage, following the trail of blood. At every twist the air grew colder, and soon the blue lapis walls had become covered in a frosting of ice. Around and around they went, climbing ever upward, afraid that they would meet the guards coming down to get them. After more turns than they could count, the blood trail left the walkway and went up some steps carved into wall of ice.

They stopped, wondering which way to go.

Thud-thud . . . thud-thud.

The sound of heavy boots marching above decided for them. They raced up the steps, along a short tunnel carved through the ice, and came to a small, circular space. This was the lobby where people would rest before visiting the Chamber of the Great Orm. The ice passage led out of the opposite side of the chamber, but the blood trail disappeared through a curtained doorway to their left. This had once been a tunnel to the Snow

Palace, but Driffa's sisters had blocked it when Oraton-Marr arrived and it was now a short blind alley, where the sorcerer had made his underground headquarters. From behind the curtain some distance away, they could hear Driffa's voice, low and angry.

The little lobby had once been beautiful. Swirling patterns were carved into the ice walls, in which lay touches of gold and silver; these rose up to a high, conical ceiling glittering with a mosaic of blue and gold stones. Ebony benches were set into the walls and two fur cloaks hung from a line of lapis pegs driven into the ice. On the right hung a long blue silk curtain. From behind it came the dull thud of rocks being shifted and the hushed groans of effort.

Ferdie stared at the curtain—something on the other side of it felt very bad. She felt so scared that her whole body seemed to be made of jelly. "They're here," she whispered, pointing at the curtain. "Through there. I can *feel* them."

After Ferdie had been right about the cells in the Far Fortress, Oskar was no longer scathing about what she felt. He caught his twin's fear, and Tod saw Oskar turn as white as ice. Tod knew *someone* was going to have to look, so very gingerly, she drew back the curtain, just a little. "Oh!" she gasped.

It was a dramatic scene. The curtain concealed a hole that had been smashed through the wall. Beyond it was a roughly made balcony, which looked out over a huge cavern. The cavern was open to the night sky far above and was lit by a bright ball of light that hovered **Magykally** in the air, illuminating clouds of dust and shining its light onto the floor below. There, men, women and children in tattered rags, dirty and exhausted, were working to clear the remains of a lapis roof that had recently fallen in. Slowly and painfully they were piling up lumps of rubble at the sides of the cavern. They had already cleared the dusty circle of ice in the very center, which a guard—dressed in chain mail and spikes—was sweeping clean. Tod searched the workers for a telltale sheen of PathFinder hair but saw nothing. And then, in the shadows, she caught the glint of light on bars. A huge cage was placed at the back of the cavern directly opposite the balcony. In this cage were people packed tightly together, and some of the less dusty had a sheen to their hair. Tod gasped. At the very front, illuminated by small globes of light fixed to the bars, were Rosie and Jonas Sarn, staring out with expressions of dread.

Tod let the curtain drop back. “Ferdie, you’re right,” she whispered. “They’re down there. In a cage.”

“Oh!” Ferdie gasped. She went to look but Oskar, afraid that Ferdie might once again shout out, stopped her. “No, Ferd. They might see us.”

“We have to get them out,” whispered Tod. “They know that something horrible is about to happen to them. I can see it on their faces.”

Suddenly, they heard Driffa’s voice raised in anger. Then the sound of a slap and a shriek. Then silence.

“Let’s go,” said Tod.

ICE AND RUBBLE

Tod led the way out of the little lobby. They went down a small flight of steps and found themselves in a broad gallery dug from the walls of ice. Tod guessed this was the Sacred Ice Walk that Driffa had talked of.

They moved slowly along the Walk as it curved gently within the walls of the Great Chamber of the Orm. Despite the destruction and sudden shouts of “*Move! Move!*” from the guards below, the Sacred Ice Walk still had a peaceful atmosphere. Every ten yards or so an ebony bench was set into the wall opposite a small, circular opening that looked down into what had once been the beautiful Chamber of the Great Orm with its **Magykal** frozen Orm Tube. Tod could easily imagine Driffa’s people sitting quietly in contemplation.

At the sixth opening, Tod stopped. She reckoned they were now above the cage of PathFinders. Unable to resist a look, Oskar leaned out.

“Careful, Oskie!” hissed Tod, pulling him back. “Someone will see you.”

“No, they won’t,” said Oskar. “We’re in shadow here. And they’re all too busy moving rocks. Look.”

Tentatively, Tod looked down. Through the dust she saw a muddle of people. Some of the guards were herding them to the edges of the cavern while others swept away the dust so that the perfect circle of ice now glittered and sparkled in the light of the sphere above. Tod got the feeling that time was running out.

“*Move it! Move it!*” came more shouts from the guards below.

“I’m going to climb down and unlock the cage,” Oskar said. “There’s a rock pile that reaches almost up to here.”

“No, Oskie,” whispered Ferdie. “It’s dangerous.”

Oskar looked annoyed. “Of course it’s dangerous,” he said. “Everything’s dangerous now. Do you have any better ideas?”

“No,” said Tod. “We don’t. But we’re *all* going. Okay?”

One by one, they slipped out of the opening and dropped onto the rubble. A few stones skittered to the ground but went unnoticed in the activity below. Cautiously, Tod, Oskar and Ferdie moved down the rubble pile, through the deep shadows thrown by the bright sphere of light above, which was focused precisely on the circle of ice at the top of the Orm Tube.

At the foot of the rubble things began to get tricky. They became caught up in a group of workers who were being herded toward the cavern wall by a guard, his long stave with its red end prodding them like cattle. Tod, Oskar and Ferdie had no choice but to go with the flow. They ended up pressed against the sides of the Orm Chamber, wedged behind people so weary that no one gave them a second glance. Oskar began checking through his lockpicks. "I'm going to get the cage open," he whispered.

A sudden movement behind the balcony curtain caught Tod's eye, and when she looked back Oskar was gone, slipping away like a sand snake and melting into the shadows.

It was then that something happened to Ferdie, which she would remember forever—she felt a small, warm, gritty hand grasp hers. She looked down and saw a face encrusted with dirt, with streaks of pink revealed by smudged tracks of tears. Gazing up at her were the big blue eyes of her little brother, Torr. Ferdie snatched up Torr and held the little boy so tight that he had to struggle to breathe.

"Look," Ferdie whispered, swinging around to Tod. "Look what I've found!"

TORR

So many strange things had happened to Torr that seeing Ferdie again did not surprise him at all. “Ma and Pa are in a cage,” he whispered.

“I know, sweetheart,” Ferdie whispered back. “But Oskie is going to get them out.”

“Hurry, Oskie,” said Torr, with tears welling up in his eyes. “Before they make them jump in.”

Ferdie felt sick. “Make them jump into what?” she whispered.

“The ice,” Torr whispered, his voice hiccupping with sobs. “The ice on that pond thing. It’s really, really deep and they’re going to melt it and make people from our village jump in.”

Ferdie and Tod exchanged horrified looks.

“Why?” asked Ferdie.

“To find something at the bottom,” whispered Torr.

“How can they possibly find anything?” Ferdie said to Tod. “It must be fifty feet deep at least. They’ll drown. I don’t understand.”

But suddenly, Tod did understand. She understood now why Aunt Mitza had been hiding, listening to the MidSummer Circle, hearing their secret. She understood that now their secret was known it would destroy most of them. One by one the PathFinders would be thrown in until the guards found a useful one with gills. Even if they had to throw in nine people who couldn’t breathe underwater before they came to one who could, what would that matter? There were plenty to spare.

But Ferdie—who had yet to go to the Summer Circle and hear the secret—still could not understand. “Torr,” she said, “are you *sure* about this?”

“Yes,” said Torr. “Me and my friend, we’ve been listening to the guards. They can’t see us; we’ve been hiding up there.” Torr pointed to a hollow in the rubble behind them, and Tod and Ferdie saw a thin, grubby little boy with long, wavy fair hair crouched like a monkey. They exchanged excited glances—the boy’s arm was casually draped over the broad shoulders of a large black panther.

“He’s Willum,” Torr whispered, and William Heap flashed them a white-toothed smile. “Willum put dirt on my hair and my face so they didn’t know I should go in the cage. And now he’s found a panther. I want one too. If we had lots of panthers we could attack the guards and—oh! Look!” Torr pointed up to the balcony.

Two torches on either side had suddenly burst into flames.

LUCY

Ever since Lucy had lost her William, she felt she was living a long, slow nightmare—and now it had reached the part where you wake up screaming. Except Lucy knew she wasn't going to wake up.

When they had been marched into Oraton-Marr's headquarters, Lucy had been horrified to see the Lady sitting at a silver table at the end of the long ice passage. The Lady had coolly checked her timepiece and said, "So, Madam. Your boy's time is very nearly up."

Driffa had caught Lucy as she began to sway. "It will be all right," Driffa murmured. "Do not fear."

But Lucy *did* fear. And now, as she and Driffa walked behind Oraton-Marr and the Lady, heading for the long blue silk curtain in the little gilded chamber, the Lady's orders to Drone played over and over in Lucy's head. "Find the boy called William Heap. Bring him to the Orm Tube. We shall see how he swims."

As the curtain was drawn back and Oraton-Marr and the Lady stepped through it, Lucy knew she was going toward something terrible from which there was no escape.

THE MELT

The blue curtains at the back of the balcony were suddenly opened and Oraton-Marr sprang out like a jack-in-the-box. A suppressed gasp went through the Chamber of the Orm below, followed by silence as a sense of dread took hold. All eyes were on the balcony. They watched the Lady bustle eagerly out and then saw two young women quickly follow, clearly shoved through the curtains by an officious guard.

Tod and Ferdie watched Lucy and Driffa blinking into the light, trying to work out what was happening. They saw Lucy squint down at the scene below, and they knew who she was searching for. They longed to be able to tell Lucy that William was with them. That he was safe—or as safe as any of them were.

Up on the balcony Lucy could see very little. Dust hung in the air like a fine mist and the harsh glare of the overhead ball of light cast deep shadows around the sides where people were gathered. All she could see was the blind white circle of ice on top of the Orm Tube staring up at her.

But William Heap had no such trouble. The balcony was ablaze with light and he could see everyone up there perfectly. And one of the people he could see was *his mother*. He leaped up, at once realized his mistake and stopped dead. But he was too late. The Lady had seen him. She turned to the guard behind her. “There is a boy loose on the rubble. Get him.”

Oraton-Marr was annoyed. The Lady, who was his younger, endlessly annoying sister, was always trying to take over. “Leave the boy,” he snarled. “We have more important things to think about.”

Behind the Lady, Lucy saw her William for the first time in two long months. She managed to stifle a gasp but her heart began to thud so loudly she was sure the Lady would hear it and realize who the boy was. Her mind began to race, thinking of ways to get to him. She watched him greedily, his blond hair standing out against the dark walls, and soon she saw in the shadows William’s companions. Lucy’s spirits soared. Tod and Ferdie had escaped from the cage, *and now they had found William*. Lucy’s eyes did

not leave her son for a moment, and whenever he dared, William Heap popped his head up just to check that his mother was still there. And she was. William felt safe now. Because unlike Torr, who had seen his parents rendered powerless, William Heap had complete faith that his mother would make everything all right.

With a *pinky-ponk* squeak, Oraton-Marr stepped forward to the edge of the balcony. He clapped his hands, and from them came a stream of dark sparkles, which spun into a circle to form a small, black ball. With a powerful overarm throw, Oraton-Marr sent it flying from his hands. All eyes—except for Lucy’s—followed the sphere as it whizzed around the chamber, buzzing like a demented black hornet, and finally came to rest a few feet above the ice of the Orm Tube.

Oraton-Marr raised his hands and, holding his index fingers at eye level, he pointed them at the hovering sphere. Deep inside a dull orange light began to glow, brightening rapidly so that within no more than ten seconds the sphere looked like a miniature sun, shining an incandescent, dazzling white. Those close could feel waves of heat coming from it. The sorcerer stabbed his fingers downward and the white-hot sphere dropped onto the ice with a great *hisssssss* and began to whiz around in a tight circle. Faster and faster it went, with the ice fizzing and sizzling as it turned into water. Soon all that could be seen was a stream of brilliant light, glimpsed within billows of rising steam.

From the balcony above came a desperate cry from Driffa.

“Stop! Please! Stop!” Her voice echoed desolately around the Chamber of the Orm and faded away. Nothing was going to stop now.

The top of the Orm Tube was now water, but ice was continuing to rise to the surface, sending small waves out across the lapis floor and washing over the feet of those in the cage. Dusty with blue scum, the water bubbled and frothed as the sphere heated its way down through the pillar of ice inside the Orm Tube. It took ten long minutes for the ice to melt, and when the last sliver had vanished in a hiss of steam, Oraton-Marr set the sphere free, sending it shooting up into the night sky to join the stars.

The sorcerer leaned over the balcony. He gazed eagerly down into the depths of the Orm Tube for a few moments, then turned his attention to the cage full of PathFinders below. He saw the people in it staring up at him, their faces white with fear, and he smiled.

“Let the diving begin!”

THE DIVE

Oskar was still looking for a lock to pick. He had managed to creep behind the guards only to discover that the PathFinders' cage had no door. It was open at the back and led straight to a roughly hewn tunnel, which was heavily guarded by the spiky guards he had seen in the Far. As he crouched in the shadows wondering what to do, Oraton-Marr's order rang through the Chamber of the Orm. Oskar felt the bars shudder and heard a harsh clattering sound—he realized that the whole front section was being raised. In the darkness at the back of the cage, someone began to push his way forward.

The bars were up, the cage open at the front. Torches on either side flared alight, illuminating a huddle of frightened people looking down at the water, knowing that whatever was about to happen was not going to be good. A terrified silence descended.

Oraton-Marr leaned out over the balcony and addressed the PathFinders. "Before you is the last burrow made by the **Magykal** Great Orm. It was frozen by the **Enchantment** of some misguided people—" There was a scuffle behind him. Drone grabbed Driffa midlunge at Oraton-Marr and forced her into an arm lock.

"Please let her go," Lucy begged the guard. "My mistress is distressed. I will make sure she does not do it again."

Drone, who did not like what was going on any more than Lucy, nodded and released Driffa.

Oraton-Marr continued his address. "At the bottom of the Orm Tube lies the lapis Egg of the Great Orm. My **Magyk** has now released it from its **Frozen** imprisonment and soon it will be free to fulfill its destiny and become a beautiful Orm. But first it must be retrieved."

Oraton-Marr looked down at the huddle of PathFinders. His voice acquired an edge of menace. "The Orm Tube is about fifty feet deep. One by one, you will dive down to the bottom. And do not fear, ha-ha"—he chuckled at what he thought was a good joke coming up—"do not fear that

this will be difficult. It will be easy to reach the bottom, for you will each have a belt of lead around your waist. And you will each in turn have a chance to find the Egg of the Orm and bring it to the surface. Anyone who returns without the egg will be thrown back in until they have it. Or do not return at all. The choice is yours.”

At last Ferdie understood that what Torr had said was really true. She looked at Tod, horrified. “No one can go that deep and survive. *No one.*”

“Some can,” whispered Tod.

Ferdie stared at Tod as though she were mad. “No, they *can't*,” she said.

Tod shook her head. “Some can,” she repeated. “But most can't.”

“Send the first one in!” shouted Oraton-Marr.

The guard prodded Jonas Sarn forward but Rosie came too, clutching Jonas's hand. The guard understood that Rosie wanted to jump with her husband, and he did not stop her. He would have wanted his wife to do the same, he thought—though he doubted she would. The guard fastened the weight belt around Jonas's waist, muttering his apologies as he did so. Then he unclipped one of the light globes dangling from the cage and pressed it into Jonas's unwilling free hand.

As Jonas and Rosie looked into each other's eyes to say good-bye, a shout came from inside the cage. “Stop! I will jump! *I* will get you what you want.”

Tod's heart did a weird, happy-sad flip and she found she had forgotten how to breathe. She watched a tall figure step forward and she no longer knew if she was awake or dreaming. He was here. Alive. Her father. *Dan Moon.*

Dan's natural authority was such that the guard did not object when he unclipped Jonas's weight belt and placed it around his own waist. As Jonas stood dumbstruck, Dan confidently took the light from his hand. And then, before Tod had a chance to call out, Dan Moon had launched himself into the water in a perfect dive.

Too late, Tod found her voice. “No!” Her shout cut through the sound of the neat splash. “No, *no!*”

“Who is that brat?” Oraton-Marr asked, peering into the dimness below.

“There's a whole pack of them down there,” the Lady said grumpily. “I told you before. Like rats.”

“Dad!” screamed Tod. “Dad, Dad!” She pushed her way forward and people in front stepped aside to allow her through. Tod stood on the edge of

the Orm Tube and stared down into its black depths: Dan Moon and his light were gone.

“Get rid of that brat,” snarled Oraton-Marr. “Shove it in too.” But there was no need. Copying her father’s graceful dive, Tod put her hands above her head and dived into the deep, dark blue.

GILLS

The cold made Tod gasp with shock. Icy water rushed into her nose and mouth. She coughed, spluttered and a sharp stab shot into her eyes. It was the pain of ice-cold water filling up the spaces behind her nose, awakening her gills. Tod coughed once more, she gulped again for air and took in yet more water. The back of her throat closed up and she spat the water out. Tod felt the water swirling into her sinuses, filling her head and making it heavy. She felt her face grow numb with the cold and instinctively closed her mouth and took a deep breath through her nose. The pain of the cold stayed but her head cleared; she felt water moving through; she breathed out, pushing the precious warmth away into the ice-cold, and took another draught of icy water. It stung the back of her eyes, it made her jaw ache with the cold, but Tod did not care—she could breathe underwater. *She had gills!*

Controlling her breath so she sank as quickly as possible, Tod pushed her way down the smooth sides of the rock, always looking down, hoping to see Dan's light. But the weight belt had taken him down fast and Tod could see nothing below but blackness.

A sudden *clunk* came up through the water. *Something* had hit the bottom. Tod was sinking rapidly, and through the blackness she now saw a dim white glow far below, showing the dark shape of a figure lying on the bottom of the burrow.

Tod landed in the light of the sphere and Dan Moon looked up. His face, bluish-white, stared as though he had seen a ghost. He reached out to Tod, his long white fingers like tendrils, hardly daring to touch her.

Dad! mouthed Tod. *Dad!* And she threw her arms around him.

Suddenly, the PathFinder sign language made sense. *Okay?* Dan signed.

Okay, Tod signed in return. And then, *What to do?*

Even through the distortions of the water, Tod could see the anger in her father's eyes. *Take egg up,* he signed. *Knock sorcerer off perch. Like coconut. With egg.*

Where egg? Tod signed.

Don pointed down and Tod saw beneath his foot a huge, oval shape.

Big, signed Tod. *Heavy?*

Dan nodded and then he smiled. *Okay for two*, he signed.

And very good for hitting coconut, Tod signed.

Dan laughed and Tod saw bubbles of air coming from his mouth like tiny silver fish. He joined his thumb and forefinger to make the PathFinder *okay* sign once more.

Tod grinned. *Okay*, she signed.



PART XII

LAPIS LAZULI

N*o more than a few feet below* Tod and Dan lay the Heart of the Ways. As Dan let go of his weight belt and he and Tod struggled to grasp hold of the slippery, ice-cold egg, the torches in the Heart of the Ways sprung alight once more.

Like a bottlebrush coming out of a bottle, Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula emerged from Way VI. Behind him came Marcia, Septimus and Simon. Milo—much to his disgust—had been left behind with his stash of weapons to guard Marcia’s Hub.

“Welcome to my home,” said the Grula-Grula. He stood tall and proud, his orange fur tinged with blue dust of the lapis, his pink eyes shining with joy at having guided such eminent Wizards through what all Grula-Grulas considered to be *their* Ancient Ways.

Marcia and Simon looked around in amazement, but Septimus remembered his manners. “We thank you for your guidance, O wise Grula,” he said.

Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula bowed, and a sprinkling of blue fell lazily from his fur.

Marcia was awestruck. Lapis was a **Magykal** stone and the Castle was reputed to contain the largest amount of lapis lazuli in the world, but even she had never seen so much lapis in one place. It looked as though Driffa’s story of the Egg of the Orm was true. Marcia began to grow very concerned. If Oraton-Marr did indeed get the egg—and, of course, manage to hatch it—then he, too, could produce vast amounts of lapis lazuli. The Castle could soon find itself in thrall to a very powerful sorcerer indeed.

Septimus was equally stunned. “This is a powerful place,” he said, his voice echoing in the empty chamber as an icy drop of water landed on his hair and ran down the back of his neck. “Fair Grula, I pray you tell us,” Septimus said. “Where is the Egg of the Orm?”

The Grula-Grula began to hum a high-pitched tune, which he had a tendency to do when worried, then he raised a long, hairy arm and pointed to the dome of lapis above. "It is up there," he said. "Wrapped in ice for its sleep." A sudden deluge of water landed on the Grula-Grula, soaking his fur.

"Doesn't look like it's ice anymore," Marcia muttered.

Clutching a handful of Lucy's ribbons, Simon cared nothing for the Egg of the Orm. All he could think of was his wife and son. "But where *are* they?" he muttered, looking around. "How do we get out of here?"

Grula-Grulas tended to be shortsighted and Benhira-Benhara was no exception. He screwed up his eyes and squinted at the round hole between Way I and Way XII, puzzled by the shine of metal across it. "Through there," he said. "But now there are bars."

Simon strode off across the smooth lapis floor, slippery with water, oblivious to the icy drips, which were falling fast now. At the barred exit he saw, just beyond the portcullis, the last of Lucy's ribbons. "They're here!" he shouted, shaking the bars impatiently. A trickle of stones fell from the roof.

"Leave it be, Simon," Marcia said, hurrying after him. "There's an easier way to get through bars than that. I'll do a **Flux**."

Simon gave the portcullis another angry pull and a serious shower of gravel and stone fell, covering them in blue grit. "I've got it!" he shouted. "It's coming away." But it was not the portcullis shifting; it was the stone above it. With the sound of rolling thunder, the roof of the passage collapsed, blocking their way out and covering Lucy's ribbon with rock. Simon swung around, his eyes desperate. "I don't care what I have to do," he said in a low voice. "But I have to get to them. Now."

Marcia put her hand on Simon's arm. "Simon, please. We need to calm down and think this through."

Simon, however, had no need to think—he knew what he must do. He dropped to his knees and began scrabbling through the stones that had skittered out from the rockfall.

Marcia was afraid that Simon had gone crazy. "Please, Simon, stop," she said. "We will get to Lucy and William, I promise you. We just need a little time to work out how."

"*William* doesn't have any time," Simon said tersely, stabbing a finger at his timepiece. Then he resumed his frantic clawing through the stones,

picking up the larger ones, inspecting them and throwing them away in disgust.

Septimus knew his brother well enough to see that there was some method in what he was doing. He dropped to his knees beside Simon and said gently, “Si, what are you looking for?”

“Lapis,” he muttered. “I need a good, smooth piece big enough to fill my palm.”

Septimus rocked back on his heels. He suddenly realized what Simon was going to do. “Not a **Blind Transport?**” he said.

“Yep,” muttered Simon.

“But that’s *suicide*.”

Simon looked up, and Septimus saw the determination in his brother’s eyes and the power behind it. “Not necessarily,” Simon said. “Not if I **Go Through** with **Like-for-Like**. Not if I find the right piece of lapis.” He swore. “But I can’t find one. I *can’t*.”

Even though Simon was now an Alchemist, his first love had been **Magyk**, and some of his **Magykal** skills would put the everyday Ordinary Wizard in the Wizard Tower to shame. Simon possessed a fair amount of **Darke** skills too—he had once been an assistant to the bones of a **Darke** Wizard.

Septimus knew his brother was deadly serious. His hand went to the **Magykal** lapis lazuli amulet that he, like all ExtraOrdinary Wizards before him, wore around his neck. Known as the Akhu Amulet, it was imbued not only with power from the Wizard Tower, but upon accepting it, Septimus had—as was traditional—transferred most of his own personal **Magyk** into its core. Without the Akhu Amulet, Septimus was little more **Magykal** than Miranda Bott. But despite this, he knew what he must do. Septimus pulled the amulet over his head and held it out to Simon.

“No!” both Marcia and Simon exclaimed together.

“Yes,” Septimus said calmly. “This is ancient Orm lapis. The best **Like-for-Like** you can get. But more important than that, it will protect you. Take it, Simon. Please, *take it*.”

Simon stared at the beautiful teardrop stone bounded by a gold band with the delicate lines of a dragon scribed into it. Never, not even in his most fevered dreams, had it ever crossed his mind that one day his youngest (and once-hated) brother would be holding out the Akhu Amulet to him, begging him to take it.

Marcia said nothing. Septimus was ExtraOrdinary Wizard now. If he wished to risk giving the symbol of his office to Simon, then that was for him to do. She did not think she would have done the same, however.

“Thank you,” Simon murmured. “I will return it, I promise you on my life.”

Septimus pushed the amulet into Simon’s hands and felt an emptiness come over him. Simon clutched the warm lump of lapis in his palms and felt the power of thousands of years of **Magyk** coursing through him. Exhilarated, he raced to the center of the Heart of the Ways and stood exactly beneath the head of the Great Orm. Looking up at the coils of lapis roof, Simon raised his arms like a diver and began to murmur the **Blind Transport Incantation**.

Septimus lip-read the **Darke** words: *ekat em, Nomis, sipal nihtiw sipal*. There was a flash of what Septimus called **Darke** light, and Simon Heap and the Akhu Amulet were gone, drawn up into the rock above, **Like** joining with **Like**. A sudden downpour of ice-cold water from the very spot that Simon had **Gone Through** drenched them all.

“**Umbrella?**” asked Marcia.

“Yes, please,” Septimus said rather faintly.

“**Umbrella!**” Marcia commanded. A rounded purple canopy spread over their heads and the water stopped pouring onto them. The Grula-Grula, which now looked not unlike an enormous, upright drowned cat—and just as miserable—shuffled underneath the **Umbrella** apologetically. He smelled of wet and very old dog.

The water hammered down on their purple canopy and Marcia shepherded Septimus out of the deluge and took shelter in the entrance of one of the Ways. Septimus looked shocked and pale. Marcia reached up, took off Septimus’s purple wool beanie, which Sarah had knitted for him and he had taken to wearing—much to Marcia’s disapproval. She wrung out the hat, did a quick **Dry** spell and put it back on Septimus’s head.

“Now, Septimus,” she said. “Give me your dragon ring.”

Septimus looked down at the ring he wore on his right index finger, a beautiful gold dragon with an emerald eye, biting its tail. “Why?” he asked, sounding as though he had little interest in the answer.

Marcia put her arm around his shoulders. “You remember many years ago, when I was prisoner on the *Vengeance*? When I no longer had the amulet and was sick from the loss of my **Magyk**?”

Septimus gave Marcia a small smile. He remembered. He had been only ten years old; a Young Army Expendible known as Boy 412. It felt like another lifetime.

Marcia continued. “Septimus, you gave me this Dragon Ring to help me. And it did. Do you know how?”

Septimus shook his head.

“You had natural **Magyk** even then, and some of it had flowed into the ring. So when you gave me your Dragon Ring, that **Magyk** came to me. So I know this ring can be a conduit for **Magyk**. If you give it to me again, just for a few minutes, I will transfer as much **Magyk** as I can into it. And then, Septimus, when you are up and running again, I have a plan to get us out of here and back on the trail of Oraton-Marr.”

“You do?”

“I do. But I need a few quiet minutes to remember my time here as a child. I need to visualize a safe space to Transport to. And then we will go together.”

Septimus shook his head. “A **Transport** is a personal spell, Marcia. You can’t take me with you.”

“Quite right,” Marcia said briskly. “So when you’ve got some **Magyk** back you can do a **MindScreen** on me and I will show you the space. I will show you all the information you need to get there. It won’t be easy, I admit, but it is the very least I would expect from my ex-Apprentice. Now hand over that ring.”

Septimus did as he was told. “You know, Marcia,” he said ruefully, “I knew being ExtraOrdinary Wizard was going to be . . . well, extraordinary. But I never expected to be giving the Akhu Amulet to Simon while I waited in a cavern in a rainstorm with a soaking shag carpet treading on my toes—*get off, will you?*” This last was addressed to the Grula-Grula, which had moved in very close.

Marcia looked down sadly at her shoes, from which the purple python skin was peeling away. “Well, Septimus, if I learned anything when I was ExtraOrdinary Wizard, it was this.”

“What?”

“Expect the unexpected.”

THE ORM TUBE

Time slowed for Simon as the **Enchantment** took him up through the lapis lazuli and the echo of an ancient creature deep within. A mineral chill entered his bones, and in his right eye, where he had long ago placed a **Darke** compress over a deep cut, Simon felt a stab of pain and the sensation of stone entering his eye socket. Fear struck deep into him, knowing that his whole body could be turned to lapis. But there was no going back. Like a worm burrowing through rock, Simon laboriously progressed through the palimpsest of the Great Orm.

At the bottom of the Orm Tube, Dan and Tod began to swim slowly upward, holding the Egg of the Orm. It was heavy and glassy-smooth, and muscles aching, they held it tight, afraid that it would slip from their grasp and tumble to the depths.

Dan risked some quick signs. *Faster. Or someone else will be thrown in.* Suddenly a pressure wave from below sent them rocketing up.

Far below at the bottom of the Orm Tube, Simon emerged through the coldness of stone into the darkness of water. Immediately his once-much-practiced **Darke Art** of Suspension Underwater kicked in and Simon, feeling as though he were still full of rock, forced himself to ascend through the icy chill.

Tod and Dan burst out from the Orm Tube in a spume of dusty blue water, clutching a huge blue egg. A sound of wonder ran through the chamber. “Aaaaoooooh . . .”

The guard who had apologized to Jonas ran to help Dan and Tod out. “Your good health, sir, miss,” he muttered as he took the heavy egg from their trembling arms and laid it carefully on the lapis floor.

Oraton-Marr stared greedily down at the Egg of the Orm, which lay shining a brilliant blue streaked with gold. “Bring it, bring it! It is mine! I want it *now!*” he screamed down from the balcony.

“No!” Driffa shouted. “The Egg is sacred. It belongs here. With us!”

An angry murmur of agreement began to spread through the Chamber of the Orm.

Spooked by the unrest surrounding them, some of the guards slunk out of the chamber. However, there were still a few eager to be in their Master’s good books. Two of them picked up the Egg of the Orm and staggered away. Tod and Dan watched it go, too exhausted to even protest. Eagerly, Oraton-Marr followed the egg’s shimmering blue progress past the necklace of openings of the Sacred Walk, watching his treasure draw ever closer.

The realization that the PathFinders were now safe spread through the Chamber of the Orm. An air of celebration began to take hold. Torr leaped up and down, yelling, “Dad! Mum!”

William jumped up too. “Mum! Mum!” he shouted, waving madly.

In the excitement, Lucy could keep quiet no longer. “William! Oh, *William!*” she called out and then clapped her hands over her mouth in horror, realizing too late what she had done.

The Lady figured it out at once. “So that brat is yours,” she spat. “I have not forgotten, Madam, that you have reneged on your contract. And his time is now *up.*” She leaned over the balcony, her short, fat finger pointing down at William Heap. “Throw that boy in!” she yelled at the guards below. “*Throw him in!* Yes, him, with the yellow hair!”

All eyes turned to William. Terrified, he skittered away down the rubble and slipped—straight into the arms of a guard. The man lifted his struggling, yelling victim up triumphantly, only to be hurled to the ground by a huge black cat that came flying out of the shadows. William squirmed his way free and hid behind Ullr, who stood with teeth bared, snarling.

Two more guards now approached, one carrying a flaming torch grabbed from the wall. Ullr shrank away—fire was the only thing he feared. While the big cat cowered, growling at the flames, the other guard cornered William and grabbed him. He carried the boy kicking and screaming to the edge of dark, deep circle of water—and threw him in.

“*Nooooooooooooo!*” A wild, animal scream came from Lucy Heap.

But on the surface of the Orm Tube there was nothing but a few ripples and a smear of rocky dust.

Lucy ran at the Lady and landed a wild punch that knocked her off her feet. The balcony gave an ominous crack as she hit the floor. Drone watched impassively and when Lucy and Driffa turned to run, he stepped politely aside and bowed. He did not like what had happened to William Heap.

Down in the Orm Chamber, Dan and Tod struggled to their feet, intending to dive in after William. But an intense shivering had set in, leaving them weak, and when guards roughly pushed them away, they staggered back helplessly.

“Ullr!” yelled Tod. “Ullr!” There was no response.

In the PathFinder cage, anger was spreading. People at the back were pressing forward and those in the front were daring to venture out. The guards could feel the rage coming through the bars.

“Leg it,” one muttered under his breath.

“Yeah. Before they get us,” growled his neighbor.

They broke ranks and ran—and were followed by several others. On their way up they met Lucy hurtling toward them. They stood back respectfully and allowed her to pass.

“It’s not right what they did to her boy,” said one.

“We should have stopped it,” said the other.

“I would have if you had,” said his friend.

“You never said.”

“Neither did you.”

“Well, we can all go home now,” said another.

“*If* we’ve got a home to go to. *If* that sorcerer hasn’t set fire to it like he said he would,” said his friend.

Oraton-Marr was the last one standing on the balcony. He looked down with disdain at his sister, lying on her back like a stranded beetle. She was always so undignified. He saw the unrest in the Orm Chamber below, the guards deserting their posts, the angry fists shaking at him, the wagging fingers pointing and then, in the depths of the water of the Orm Tube, he saw a dark shape moving toward the surface—a shape far too big to be a boy. A sudden fear came over Oraton-Marr. Maybe the Great Orm had not died. Maybe it was a *living* Orm curled up on the roof of the Heart of the Ways. And maybe the living Orm had come to reclaim its egg. He sprang out through the curtain, grabbed the waiting egg from the guards and

wrapped it in his cloak. Then he swung it over his shoulder like a huge sack of potatoes and leaped away in great bounds, heading for the Heart of the Ways. At that, the last of the guards quietly left the Chamber of the Orm.

On the balcony, the Lady struggled to her feet. A jeer rose up from below. “Get her!” one of the PathFinders yelled, and the shout was taken up. “Get her! Get her! *Get her!*” The Lady turned and fled, a roar of triumph following in her wake.

But the triumph was not for the Lady’s departure—it was for an unexpected arrival. In a cascade of black water, Simon Heap burst out of the Orm Tube with his son in his arms.

Halfway down the passage leading to the Heart of the Ways, the Lady bumped into her brother bounding back up. “Blocked!” he gasped. “Rockfall.”

“Oh no! What shall we do, Orrie?” his sister wailed.

“Clear it!” snapped Oraton-Marr. “Then meet me at the rendezvous.”

The Lady watched her brother spring away. It wasn’t fair, she thought. She always had to do the dirty work. Why was he **Magykal** and she wasn’t? Everyone seemed to have something special about them, even those grubby PathFinders. So why didn’t she? *It just wasn’t fair.*

EXTRAORDINARIES

On the SnowPlain above, a shimmer of purple light appeared at the foot of a tall cone of lapis lazuli and within it two figures—one in a purple fur cloak and matching beanie, the other in a shimmering multicolored cloak and some rather ratty purple python shoes—began to materialize. Marcia and Septimus had successfully managed their **Transport**.

The last flickers of purple evaporated and they took stock of where they were. Above them the magnificent Blue Pinnacle of the Eastern SnowPlain rose up, dark against the star-dusted sky, but all around them was destruction. The snow had become mud littered with huge piles of spoil, in the middle of which was a gaping hole in the ground from which a column of light blazed up into the sky. As the disconnection of the **Transport** slowly left Marcia and Septimus, they saw a tall, hunched shape come springing up from the light. It bounded away into the night in high, bouncing leaps.

“That’s *him*,” Marcia whispered. “That’s Oraton-Marr. Look at the way he’s moving. But I didn’t realize he was so hunched.”

“That’s not a hunch,” said Septimus, whose eyesight was much better than Marcia’s at night. “That’s the Orm Egg!”

“But *how*?” Even as she spoke, Marcia saw that Septimus was right.

“He’s not getting away with it,” Septimus said. “I’m going after him.”

Marcia stopped him. “No, Septimus. *I’ll* go. It’s too dangerous for you. You don’t have enough **Magyk**.”

Far below in the Chamber of the Orm, William Heap lay lifeless in his mother’s arms. Desperately, Simon tried to revive his son, but William’s lips were dark blue; his face was ice-cold and beginning to set like stone. Everyone looked on in horror. There was nothing they could do.

It was then that Tod remembered the whistle that Marcia had given her. She guessed that Marcia was still in her Keep, on the other side of the

world, but there was nothing to be lost in calling her. And so Tod took out her silver whistle and blew.

A faint whistle came from beneath Marcia's layers of fur under her cloak. She looked down in surprise.

"No, *I'm* going," Septimus was telling Marcia impatiently. "Listen to you, you're in no state to do anything—you're wheezing with the cold. I'm going to get him." And he was gone, racing across the snow, following the long, thin tracks of the spring blades. Another faint sound drifted up from beneath her cloak and Marcia at last remembered the silver whistle. With a jolt of fear, she realized that Tod was in trouble somewhere. But *where*? Marcia closed her eyes and tried to **Feel** where Tod might be.

And so it was that Marcia did not see Oraton-Marr stop and take a small **Darke Dart** from a holster he wore on his belt. She did not see him raise his hand and take aim at the young man in purple running toward him. Nor did she see Septimus stop, aware that something **Darke** had him in its sights.

But Marcia did feel something nudge her leg. Her eyes snapped open and she saw a panther, black as the night, crouched beside her. Its green eyes looked deep into hers and Marcia understood.

"Ullr," she said. "Take me to Tod."

Down in the Chamber of the Orm, Lucy was pleading. "Si, please . . . you *have* to do something. I don't care what it is. **Darke** stuff or anything. But please, please do *something*."

Simon was numb. He felt like his head was full of rock. He couldn't think of anything at all.

Tod pushed through the crowd gathered around William. "Lucy, Lucy! Marcia can help!"

"But Marcia's not here, is she?" Lucy said bitterly.

"On the contrary, Marcia *is* here," a familiar voice said. "Stuck at the back of a crowd of nosy gawkers. Now get out of the way and let me through." The anxious crowd around William parted and Marcia strode forward. She kneeled beside Lucy, placed her hand on William's forehead and said quietly, "All will be well."

Lucy looked at Marcia in disbelief—William lay heavy and cold in her arms, no longer part of the Living world.

But Tod understood what Marcia could do. She—along with everyone in the hushed Chamber of the Orm—watched as Marcia took a deep breath in, one that seemed to go on forever. She saw Marcia lean over William Heap’s ice-blue face and begin to breathe out a stream of pinkish air. It came, tumbling and curling around William, surrounding him in a soft, warm cloud. Slowly the pallor left William’s face, the stony set of his features relaxed and then, suddenly, William sat up. He coughed, spat out a mouthful of water and was promptly sick all down Lucy’s front.

Lucy looked up at Marcia with tears in her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you, Marcia. Thank you *forever*.”

Marcia stood up. “He’ll be fine now. But excuse me. I have to go back and help Septimus.”

Simon sprang to his feet. “Is he in trouble?” he asked.

“Possibly,” said Marcia.

“I’ll come with you,” Simon said.

A DARKE DART

They found Septimus lying in the snow, hands outstretched. A red dart with black flights was stuck into the soft part of his right hand—the web between thumb and forefinger. His hand was black and swollen but the Dragon Ring on his finger glowed bright, keeping the **Darke** at bay as best it could. Around Septimus’s wrist was a tight purple band where the black stopped—he had used his old Senior Apprentice ribbon as a tourniquet.

“Marcia,” Septimus whispered. “It’s a **Darke Dart**. Take it out. I . . . can’t.”

Marcia looked at Septimus’s hand in dismay—streaks of black were already snaking beneath the purple band and flowing up his arm. Marcia knew it was not easy to remove a **Darke Dart**. The flights were razor-sharp and the point had a venomous barb on the end that would tear Septimus’s hand as it came out and spread the poison still farther. But Marcia also knew that Simon knew more about the **Darke** than she ever would. “Simon,” she asked, “can you do this?”

“Yeah,” said Simon. “I think I can.” He kneeled down beside Septimus. “Sep,” he said. “You must keep totally still. Okay?”

“Okay,” Septimus whispered.

From his Alchemie belt, Simon took out a tiny pair of wire cutters. “Marcia, I need you to hold the **Dart** steady. But be very careful. You know the flights are often poison-tipped?”

Marcia nodded. She cautiously closed her fingers around the body of the dart, well below the flights. Simon lay flat on the snow, squinting at Septimus’s hand. Very gingerly he placed the wire cutters around the point of the dart where it joined the body. Then, muttering something that neither Marcia nor Septimus recognized, he closed the wire cutters and cut through the point. Marcia threw the top of the **Dart** into the snow. The point of the **Dart** now stuck up through Septimus’s hand like a black spike.

“Right, Sep,” said Simon. “I’m going to hang on to the barb and Marcia will pull your hand straight up. Fast. Okay?”

“Yep,” said Septimus.

Concentrating hard, Simon took hold of the poisonous barb. Marcia gripped Septimus’s hand.

“Pull!” said Simon.

“*Aaaargh!*”

It was done. All that was left in the snow was the point of the **Darke Dart** surrounded by a pool of red. Septimus sat up blearily, clutching his hand. “I can’t see,” he groaned.

“Your hat’s slipped down, Sep,” said Simon, gently pulling up Septimus’s beanie. “And this belongs to you, little bro.” Simon slipped the Akhu Amulet over Septimus’s head so it lay around his brother’s neck once again. “Thank you, Sep. I will never forget. Never, *ever.*”

Septimus smiled. “And neither will I,” he said. “You saved my life.”

THE SNOW PALACE

As the sun rose on a new day, Snow Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful, took her Snow Palace back under control. She found her elderly sisters hiding in a cave with the last of the Palace servants—all being driven to distraction by their one remaining sorcerer.

The four sisters now set to work. Soon a well-worn road of compacted snow ran between the Blue Pinnacle and the Palace, on which Driffa's fleet of silver sleighs ran back and forth carrying the exhausted prisoners to sanctuary. Furs were found to keep people warm, beds were made in the guest rooms and fires were laid in the huge brick chimneys that snaked up through the rocks at the back of the Snow Palace. The cooks came out of hiding and got to work.

Leaving Tod and Dan to spend time together, Ferdie, Oskar, Torr and William explored the Snow Palace. They spent hours going from one ice tower to another, traveling the seemingly delicate—but very strong—bridges that joined them. It felt like traversing a huge, sparkling spiderweb, but the spider that had once lurked at the edge was gone.

At the front of the Snow Palace was a wide promenade bounded by ramparts that overlooked the vast SnowPlain hundreds of feet below. It was warmed by braziers of burning logs suspended over fire pits, and people gathered around these, talking contentedly. And when they were warm, they would wander to the ramparts and gaze out at the Plain, watching the progress of the sleighs, the sun glinting off their runners, going steadily back and forth, beginning the long, slow task of setting everything to rights.

It was beside one of the fire pits that the Sarns and the Heaps met Samuel Starr. Samuel had been locked away with many of the other prisoners in one of the Iglopuks, but he already knew every detail of the events in the Orm Chamber. "When I heard the Lady had fled, I knew it was something to do with you, Ferdie Sarn," he said with a broad smile. "I always thought you were more than a match for her."

"It wasn't just me," said Ferdie.

“It was all of them,” Rosie Sarn said. “But none of us would be here now, Samuel, if it had not been for your helping them to escape from that terrible ship. We can never thank you enough.”

Samuel bowed. “It was my pleasure,” he said.

William—dutifully wearing the fur jacket his mother had taken from the Fire Pit—chased off with Torr to explore. “William! Be careful!” Lucy called out anxiously.

“He’ll be fine, Lu,” Simon said soothingly.

But as Lucy watched her son go running across a slender bridge that climbed precipitously up to the tallest tower, she knew that from now on she would always worry about William. She felt a sudden sympathy for Sarah Heap, with *seven* boys to fret about. Hand in hand, Lucy and Simon wandered along the promenade, Lucy stealing glances up at two small figures cavorting on the bridge. Entranced by the glittering scene, Lucy and Simon stopped to gaze at the graceful towers of opalescent ice, tall and thin with pointed roofs, each one topped with an elegant blue-and-gold finial. The sun shone down on the frosted snow, for the **Enchantment** that kept the snow forever **Frozen** had not been destroyed here. As Simon looked up, Lucy caught a flash of blue in his right eye.

“Si,” she said. “Hold still. You’ve got something in your eye.”

Simon put his hand up to his eye. He had hoped Lucy wouldn’t notice—at least not until she stopped being so nervous. “I know I have,” he said. “It’s lapis. From the palimpsest of the Orm.”

“Well, let’s get it out, then,” Lucy said.

Simon shook his head. “No, Lu. It’s part of my eye now. The iris is solid lapis.”

The enormity of what Simon had done began to dawn on Lucy. “Can . . . can you still see through it?”

Simon shook his head. “No. But it was worth it, Lu. Worth it to get our William back. And I’ve still got one eye left.” He grinned and Lucy saw a glint of gold in his lapis-blue eye. It suited him. “Oh, Si . . .” she said.

Later that day, wrapped in Driffa’s best furs, Tod and Dan too were wandering the vast Snow Palace. Still in a daze from finding her father alive, Tod was reveling in the beauty surrounding them. From that day onward she would always feel a profound happiness in the presence of snow.

They followed strings of sparkling lights strung along the suspended walkways, explored delicate ice turrets suffused with deep blue shadows and took winding stairs of blue down into lapis caves where hot springs bubbled up, filling the air with steam and heat. And as they roamed, Dan told Tod about the day he disappeared.

“It was a perfect fishing day. I was laying crab pots on the far side of the headland where the stream comes out of the Far, when I saw Mitza on the beach. She was waving and—well, you know how clearly sound travels over water—I heard her yelling, ‘Dan, Dan, come quick. Alice is hurt!’ I set the sails and turned for home but Mitza got even more frantic. ‘No!’ she screamed. ‘She’s here. In the Far!’

“I was so worried that I didn’t question it. I took *Vega* up onto the beach and Mitza met me. She looked terrified, and that really scared me. I begged her to tell me what had happened but she just grabbed my hand and dragged me into the Far.” Dan shook his head. “Suddenly I was surrounded by guards and creatures from a nightmare.”

“Garmin,” said Tod. “Oh, *Dad*.”

“They took me to the Far Fortress and then here. Mitza told me you would be next. It was some old feud she had with Cassi—which she reckoned she’d well and truly won. Tod, I was so worried for you. Every day I thought of you being at home with that awful woman and those terrifying creatures coming for you. And there was nothing I could do. *Nothing*.” Dan shook his head, and Tod saw tears spring into his eyes.

Tod linked her arm through Dan’s and together they walked in silence for a while, simply happy to be together again. After some time Tod said, “Dad . . . when you dived in, did you know you had gills?”

Dan shook his head. “No. But as leader of the Circle it was my duty to go first.”

Tod nodded. She’d thought as much.

They wandered along to the promenade and joined the watchers gazing out anxiously to the Blue Pinnacle. Overnight it had tilted and now looked very unstable. The words “collapse” and “any minute now” could be heard from the gathered crowd.

Far below, a handsome silver-and-blue sleigh pulled by four white horses was setting off. In it rode the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, the Deputy Castle Alchemist, the ex–ExtraOrdinary Wizard and the Snow Princess.

As Dan looked out across the SnowPlain, he felt nervous—and it wasn't about the Blue Pinnacle. There was something he had to ask Tod. "Alice," he said rather formally. "So. Would you like to come home?"

Tod didn't know how to answer.

Dan did not press her. He stood quietly beside his daughter, who he thought had changed so much in the past two long months. Apart from growing at least two inches taller, she had become self-assured and so very much reminded him of her mother. He had noticed also the change in her eyes—a **Magykal** green was beginning to break through. Dan watched Tod's gaze follow the sleigh and he thought he knew the answer she would give him.

FIVE MAGYK

Under a clear blue sky, with a bright sun blazing down, four figures—one in white, one in purple, one in black and one shimmering in a cloak of many colors—stood beside the dangerously tilting Blue Pinnacle. They stared down into the pit before them, and far below they saw the empty Orm Tube drained of water, which had poured out through the cracked base where Simon had forced his way through the rock. And although they could not see it, at the very bottom of the Orm Tube was an empty, egg-shaped hollow, where for many thousands of years, the Egg of the Orm had lain.

“It’s a disgrace,” said Marcia. “To plunder a **Magykal** creature’s birthplace in this way.” She shook her head. “It makes me ashamed to call myself a Wizard.”

Princess Driffa stared down, shaking her head sadly. “This place has nothing. No future. Just a collapsing Pinnacle and a dead Orm, cracked and broken.”

“Not necessarily,” Septimus said.

The Princess looked at Septimus, her blue eyes the color of the sky above. “How so?” she asked.

“Because we will restore the earth and the lapis below. We will remake the Chamber of the Orm. We will set the Blue Pinnacle straight once more and renew its **Enchantment**.”

Driffa looked at Septimus in disbelief. “No one is that powerful,” she said.

“No *one*,” agreed Septimus. “But there are four of us here. Each one of us has a different kind of **Magyk**. But I believe we will need five to make this kind of **Magyk**. Do you agree, Marcia?”

Marcia did not answer straightaway. **Five Magyk** was an Ancient Art and was highly suitable for anything to do with the earth. It was a little bit **Darke**, a little bit Witchy, but Marcia was rapidly getting over her objections to both. It seemed that nothing was as clear-cut as she had once

believed. She smiled at Septimus. “You’re the ExtraOrdinary Wizard,” she said. “And I agree with you. *Whatever* you say.”

Septimus looked startled.

But old habits die hard and Marcia could not resist adding a little advice. “Of course, ideally the fifth will be a novice. Talented but untainted. First **Magyk** is powerful **Magyk**.”

They both looked back to the glittering towers of the Snow Palace. Marcia smiled. “I’ll go and fetch her, shall I?”

Septimus, Simon and Driffa watched Marcia take the sleigh back, showing the skill that she had learned as a girl of seven, when she would drive her itinerant **Magykal** father and mother across the **Enchanted** Plains at breakneck speed. Simon shielded his eyes against the glare. The shard of lapis felt sharp and hot in the sun. But he thought nothing of it. His son was safe and he was needed for his own, personal **Magyk**. Nothing could be better.

From the promenade, through a pair of eyeglasses, Dan watched his daughter make her first **Magyk**. He saw her, barefoot on the bare earth, being part of a spectacularly powerful **Five-Star Enchantment**, and he felt immensely proud. And when Tod returned, buzzing with the excitement of being part of such potent **Magyk**, Dan saw her eyes had turned a brilliant green and he knew that Cassi TodHunter Draa had been granted her dying wish. Alice TodHunter Moon was becoming part of the world of **Magyk**.

HOME

But for all her **Magyk**, Tod was still a PathFinder. A few days later when everyone was rested, Driffa escorted Tod, Dan and the PathFinders down through the **Re-Enchanted** walkways. With them came a new villager: Samuel Starr had decided to return to the home of his forebears.

Silently, they followed Driffa along the Sacred Ice Walk, filing down the steps into the beautiful blue Chamber of the Orm. The **Re-Enchanted** chamber possessed a delightful echo. The PathFinders' murmurs of amazement traveled around its smooth lapis walls, until the air was filled with a happy hum. **Five Magyk** had restored all to as it had been.

Except for the Orm Tube, which lay empty and dark.

"Castle **Magyk** will return the Egg of the Orm to us," Driffa said with a smile, thinking of a moonlight promise that the Castle's ExtraOrdinary Wizard had made.

Beneath the two golden eyes of the palimpsest of the Great Orm, Tod waited for the villagers to join her. She lifted the **PathFinder** from its lapis box and slipped the hollow lapis dome over its onyx sphere, then she took her pet rock from her pocket and touched the top of the **PathFinder** to its nose—at least, Tod hoped it was its nose. The arrow swung around and pointed to Way IX, which Tod knew would be the first of many.

A few Grula-Grulas were hanging around—just as they had always done before the Garmin polluted the Ways. The color of their fur varied from dull brown through to brilliant red, but all possessed tiny, shining pink eyes. A glittering of pink pinpoints watched the villagers join hands and followed the long line as Tod led them into the silver-and-lapis arch of the Way. The pink eyes exchanged approving glances. It was good to see the Ancient Ways being used once more.

When the last of the PathFinders had gone, an orange Grula-Grula performed an elaborate farewell bow to his companions and disappeared into Way VI. He had decided to return to the Castle. He thought he might

pay another visit to a shop that sold cloaks, of which he had strangely fond memories.

Tod and the PathFinders traveled through five Hubs before they stepped into the Hub of the Far Fortress. Rosie Sarn recognized it immediately. She grabbed hold of Torr, Ferdie and Oskar—she was not letting go of them in such a terrible place. But the Far Fortress was deserted. The Lady and Aunt Mitza were gone and all that was left of the Garmin were dried-up white skeletons—Oraton-Marr’s **Enchantment** had deserted them, too.

Oskar led the PathFinders home through the Far. When Marni Sarn saw them emerge from the trees she thought she was dreaming, but Jerra knew better. He ran to meet them, laughing. “I knew it!” he said. “I *knew* you’d be back.” And he picked Torr up and swung him around and around until they both fell to the ground, laughing.

Later that night, beneath the Bell, the PathFinders met to talk about rebuilding their village. But before the meeting, Dan had something to say to Oskar and Ferdie. “You know our PathFinder secret now,” he said, “but I am asking you not to tell the little ones. It is too dangerous for them to know. Does Torr understand what happened?”

“No,” said Ferdie. “Torr thinks it was all **Magyk**.”

“In a way he is right,” Dan said. “Things we don’t understand *are* **Magyk**.”

“Anyway,” said Oskar, “Ferdie and I are going to forget all about the secret. We want to hear it properly from you next summer in the Circle.”

“And so you will,” Dan said with a broad smile.

“Will . . . will Tod be there too?” asked Oskar.

Dan’s smile faded. “I don’t know,” he said. “You will have to ask her.”

But no one did ask Tod, in case she said she wouldn’t be.

Over the long, warm autumn, the PathFinders built their homes anew and Tod and Dan cleared their house of wreckage and the smell of fear. At the night of the equinox the village met beneath the Bell to hear the story of what became known as the Great Escape. And Tod realized with a thrill that the name Alice TodHunter Moon would be spoken of for generations to come.

The PathFinders began to reclaim the Far. A wide track was made to the Far Fortress and the villagers knocked down the cells that had held them and their ancestors prisoner. Tod, Ferdie and Oskar made many visits to the Castle, taking the shortcut through Way VII. Ferdie and Oskar spent good times with Lucy, Simon and William, and Tod got to know Dandra Draa and the Wizard Tower until it felt almost like home, just as her mother had hoped it would.

As autumn turned to winter, the final PathFinder house was rebuilt and Tod knew at last what she wanted to do. One day, Tod brought two invitations to the village—one for the Sarn family and one for Dan. They read:

The Wizard Tower

*On MidWinter Feast Day
The ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Septimus Heap,
Invites You to the Apprentice Supper
In Honor of His Apprentice,
Alice TodHunter Moon.*

Dan put the invitation in pride of place on the shelf above the fire. He turned to Tod with tears in his eyes. “Your mother would have been so proud,” he said.

It was after the Apprentice Supper, when Tod, Ferdie and Oskar were on Snake Slipway looking out over the frozen Moat, that Tod said, “We mustn’t let it happen again. Not to our village. Not here. Not *anywhere*.”

Oskar and Ferdie knew exactly what Tod meant. “But it might,” Ferdie said. “That sorcerer has the Egg now.”

“I know,” Tod said. “Which is why we are going to get it back.”

“But how?” Ferdie and Oskar said together.

Tod gazed up at the moon, imagining that somewhere in the world the moon might be looking down on the Egg of the Orm right then. “I don’t know,” she said. “We’ll do it somehow. And whatever we do, we’ll do it together. Us three.”

Oskar grinned. “Tribe of Three,” he said, holding up the first three fingers on his right hand. “PathFinder sign.”

Tod and Ferdie did the same. “Tribe of Three.”

“Cool,” said Oskar, who had already picked up Castle slang.

Tod was right about the moon. That moment, in a distant land, it was shining down on an ancient frozen quay—deserted apart from a figure carrying a large, egg-shaped blue silk sack. As the snow swirled, the figure watched a beautiful ship with *Tristan* emblazoned on its prow sail toward him. Far above him hovered a green dragon, watching him as it had done for many long weeks. Oraton-Marr looked up. “Go *away*, will you!” he screamed. “*Get lost!*”

But just as the dragon had taken no notice of a young Queen shouting at him, he took no notice of a **Darke** old sorcerer, either. The dragon had an Orm Egg to look out for. Orms were family. And family was what mattered, whether you were a dragon, an Orm or just a funny little human being.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Apologies to Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, for the mangling of his
“Sonnet 53”:

*What is your substance, whereof are you made
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.
Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
Is poorly imitated after you;
On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new:
Speak of the spring and foison of the year,
The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
The other as your bounty doth appear;
And you in every blessed shape we know.
In all external grace you have some part,
But you like none, none you, for constant heart.*

courte-deare-verse (our de Vere a secret)

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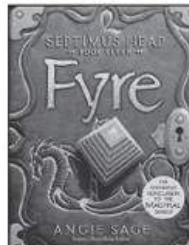
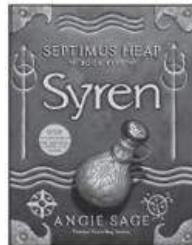
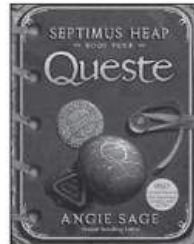
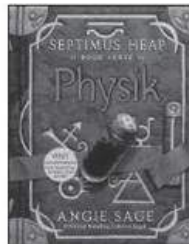
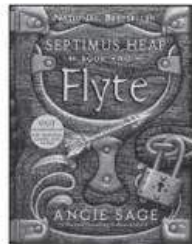


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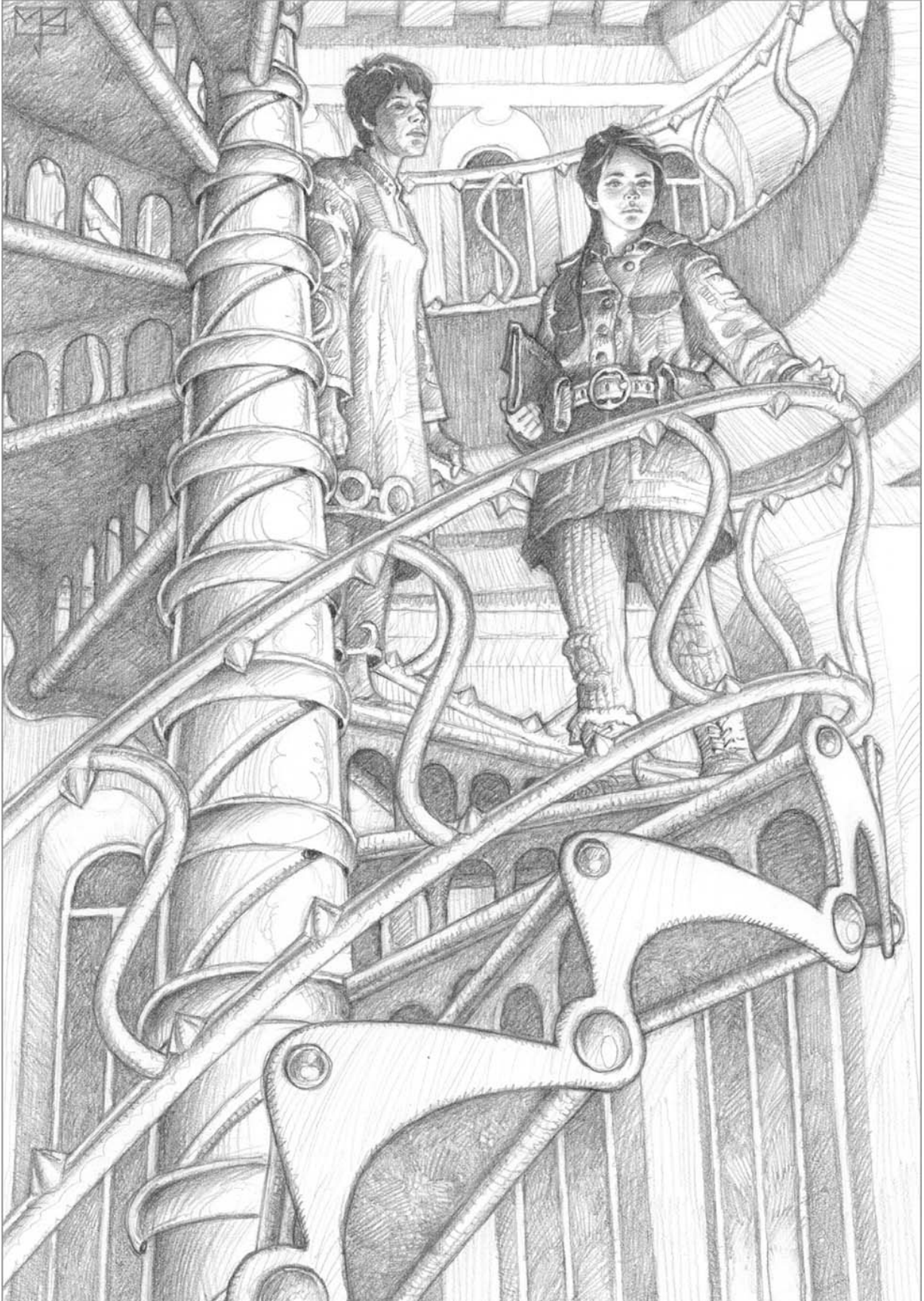
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DEDICATION

For Benjy Wishart

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MAPS











PART I

THE GREEN SEAGULL

A green dragon flew low across the sea. Like a giant, infinitely annoying seagull, the dragon was following a beautiful blue-and-gold ship named the *Tristan*. Despite all manner of missiles hurled at him from the ship—including a large quantity of **Darke ThunderFlashes**—the dragon had not once lost sight of his quarry.

After long weeks at sea, the *Tristan* arrived at a small port on the edge of a vast desert. The dragon—much to the dismay of the Harbor Master—swooped in and landed on the roof of the tallest house on the quayside. Despite yet more missiles thrown at him (this time by the Harbor Master), the dragon did not move. He perched on the roof of the Harbor Master's house and continued to observe the *Tristan* with great interest.

“What's it watching for?” the Harbor Master asked anyone who was brave enough to come near. No one knew. Later, when someone told him that if you called a dragon by its name it would do whatever you desired, the Harbor Master asked, “What d'you think its name is?” No one knew that, either.

The dragon's name was Spit Fyre and he was watching for an Orm Egg. The final egg of the now extinct Great Orm, this was no ordinary egg. It was big enough to need carrying in both arms like a baby, it was heavy enough to make even the strongest arms ache and it was covered in a leathery skin infused with brilliant blue lapis lazuli. Inside was an Orm embryo, the last of its race, stolen from its resting place in the Eastern SnowPlains by the sorcerer Oraton-Marr. Spit Fyre knew the Orm Egg was on board the *Tristan* and he was determined that wherever the egg went, he would go too.

The Orm Egg now rested on a soft blue cushion in the best cabin of the *Tristan*. Under Spit Fyre's relentless gaze, Oraton-Marr—a small man with short iron-gray hair—paced the deck above. He was accompanied by his

sister, a large woman swathed in shining blue silk who was known to all as “the Lady.” The Lady was an imposing figure. Despite her bulk, she moved smoothly along the deck, as though on little wheels. Her hair was bound in a blue cloth wrapped many times around her head, and on her hand perched a small, terrified bird, its leg tied to a wisp of silver chain that the Lady wore around her wrist. Behind the Lady, like a gloomy shadow, a square, flat-footed woman with the gait of an overweight duck followed. Her name was Mitza Draddenmora Draa; she kept a respectful distance but her narrowed eyes did not miss a thing.

The Lady was, to her brother’s disgust, taller than he was. Usually the sorcerer wore spring blades upon his feet, which allowed him to tower over his sister, but after some undignified falls he had been forced to give them up on board the ship. The shorter version of Oraton-Marr and the Lady were discussing how to get the Orm Egg off the ship without Spit Fyre snatching it. The Lady had lapsed into bossy mode—which she always did when her brother was his natural height—but that afternoon the sorcerer was having none of it. He narrowed his dark green eyes and stared up at the dragon that had haunted them like a shadow through raging storms, blazing sun and starlit nights. “I shall set a trap,” he said. “That dragon won’t know what’s hit him.”

The next morning just before sunrise, Oraton-Marr dispatched half a dozen deckhands to hide on the quay in the shadows beneath the ship. All were brandishing nets and **FireStix**: long **Darke** spears with barbed ends of dull red metal—a weapon that the sorcerer had perfected during his time on board the *Tristan*. The barbs of **FireStix** were razor-sharp, designed to cut through dragon skin like a hot knife through butter, and then—Oraton-Marr was particularly proud of this—their sticky black tips were **Primed** to ignite on contact with dragon blood. The sorcerer looked up at Spit Fyre and smiled. The dragon would burst into flames, set alight from within. He was looking forward to that.

As the *Tristan* lay gleaming in the morning sun, from the top of the Harbor Master’s roof—which was now sagging alarmingly—Spit Fyre eyed a shining lapis blue egg shape resting proudly on a soft blue cushion being escorted up on deck by two sailors in dress uniform. Spit Fyre’s keen dragon eye also saw a movement in the shadows beneath the ship and the dull red glint of something sharp. He tilted his head to one side and

considered the matter, watching as the cushion and its passenger were paraded down the gangplank. Spit Fyre gave a snort of contempt and turned his gaze back to the *Tristan*. He had no interest in an empty egg made from papier-mâché.

Despite the parading of the “egg” around the quay three times, Spit Fyre did not move. When Oraton-Marr realized his plan had not worked, he had a screaming fit and had to be calmed down by his sister. The “egg” and its cushion were abandoned in the middle of the quay and by evening had become a popular roost for gulls.

At the dark of the moon a few days later, Oraton-Marr tried another tactic. In the dead of the night, a rolled-up sail was taken down the gangplank by three deckhands. From his perch Spit Fyre watched with interest—he knew the Egg was nearby. The dragon gave a little jump of excitement and the Harbor Master’s roof finally caved in. The three deckhands were so shocked by the snapping of timbers and the rain of falling roof tiles that they dropped the sail. Out rolled exactly what Spit Fyre had suspected: the true Egg of the Orm.

To the great dismay of the Customs Officer, Spit Fyre took up a new perch on the Customs House roof.

Oraton-Marr decided against a second screaming fit. Dragon or no dragon, he was not going to be thwarted a moment longer. He sent for a camel. Just before sunrise the next morning, the sorcerer shoved the Orm Egg unceremoniously into a sack and slung it into a bag on one side of the camel. Into the bag on the other side of the camel he put Subhan-Subhan, the cabin boy. Then, accompanied by his servant, Drone, and three deckhands armed with **FireStix**, he waved good-bye to his sister and her duck-footed companion, and climbed onto the camel.

To the relief of the Customs Officer, Spit Fyre took off from his roof.

Oraton-Marr headed out of the port. He ignored the long, straight road that led to the distant Red City just visible on the horizon, and set off into the wilderness of the vast desert of the Singing Sands. His navigator set a course for a small oasis and a star-strewn tent where an Apothecary and her two young daughters lived.

Spit Fyre followed, flying high enough to stay out of reach of the **FireStix**, but low enough to annoy.

When Oraton-Marr, bedraggled and sore, arrived at the star-strewn tent late that night, he never wanted to see a dragon or a camel again. Or a whingeing cabin boy or an egg. Or the three moaning deckhands. Or the craven Drone. But there was work to be done. Ruthlessly efficient, he took the Apothecary's baby daughter hostage and instructed the Apothecary on what to do if she wished to see the child again. He left before sunrise without the Egg, the cabin boy, the deckhands, and, to his relief, the dragon. But he was stuck with Drone and a screaming toddler. And the camel.

Spit Fyre settled on a long sand dune above the star-strewn tent and the small encampment that had sprung up around it. As soon as Oraton-Marr was out of sight, the dragon attacked. He swooped down onto the tents and as the **FireStix** flew up toward him, he met fire with **Fyre** and destroyed them. But getting the Egg was not so easy. Subhan-Subhan was loyal to his Master and threw himself across the Egg as a shield so that Spit Fyre could not snatch his prize without injuring the boy.

Spit Fyre retired to the top of the dune to wait.

That evening as the sun set, the Apothecary climbed the dune and begged the dragon not to take the Egg. She told him that in twelve weeks the sorcerer would return, and if the Egg did not hatch—or there was no Egg to hatch—her baby daughter would die.

Spit Fyre bowed his head in defeat. But he did not leave his post. His time would come.

THE COUNTDOWN BEGINS

Oraton-Marr staggered up the gangplank of the *Tristan* with Drone trailing behind carrying an exhausted toddler. The sorcerer instructed Drone to hand the hostage to his sister and went below to his cabin. He settled into his captain's chair, got up to fetch a cushion, sat down once more and took a mother-of-pearl box from a drawer in his desk. Inside the box was an assortment of origami shapes: birds, animals, ships and stars, all in pale blue. He picked out a paper flower, unfolded it, flattened it on his desk and smiled.

On one of his many walks around the quay trying to find a way to get rid of the dragon, Oraton-Marr had seen a flurry of pale blue papers blowing across the cobbles. He had picked them up because they were the perfect weight for his hobby of origami, and good paper was not easy to find. He had been very pleased with the quality of his beautiful blue paper, but was even more delighted when he had read the words upon it.

Once more, Oraton-Marr's mouth moved slowly across the words, savoring each one:

THE MAGYKAL MANUSCRIPTORIUM
AND SPELL CHECKERS INCORPORATED
NUMBER THIRTEEN WIZARD WAY, THE CASTLE.
AS PREMIER ADVISORS TO THE FABLED WIZARD TOWER,
WE ARE PROUD TO OFFER A NEW GLOBAL SERVICE.
WE HAVE MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS' EXPERIENCE.
WE CAN SOURCE MOST REQUIREMENTS.

WE HAVE AN EXTENSIVE STOCK OF
CHARMS, RUNES AND SPELL BOOKS
OR WE CAN REFURBISH YOUR OWN.

CONVENIENTLY SITUATED ON THE ANCIENT WAY SYSTEM FOR EASY ACCESS FROM
ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD.

A smile spread across Oraton-Marr's thin lips as he thought about the "fabled Wizard Tower." The sorcerer took down his almanac, turned to the map section at the back and traced his long, pointy finger along the Ways that led to the Wizard Tower. Oraton-Marr was a great believer in signs and was convinced this perfect blue paper was the sign he had been waiting for—the Wizard Tower was his destiny. But the sorcerer was not a patient man. Drumming his fingers on his desk, he decided to get things moving as soon as he could. What he needed, he thought, was an Apprentice from the Wizard Tower. A senior one who knew all its secrets and fiddly little passwords would be ideal. Oraton-Marr smiled. There were twelve long weeks until the Orm Egg hatched, but he would spend his time well. He'd take a little trip to the Castle and get hold of an Apprentice so that when he was ready to take over, everything would go smoothly. Oraton-Marr sighed. He had had quite enough trouble already. He wanted to walk into the Wizard Tower with as little aggravation as possible.

The sorcerer closed his eyes and a strange name came to him—ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He sat up, suddenly wide-awake. *That was it.* That was the name of the top wizard in the Castle. He smiled. It suited him, there was no doubt about that: Oraton-Marr, ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He liked that. His face relaxed into a sickly, satisfied smile.

If it hadn't been for the Lady—annoyed by the crying of their tiny hostage—coming to tell him it was nearly midnight, Oraton-Marr would have missed the **Magykal** hour. Cursing, he rushed up on deck and sent a signal rocket burning brilliant green up into the sky.

Far away on his dune, Spit Fyre saw a green light on the horizon arc up over the sea. Also on the dune—at what he hoped was a safe distance from the dragon—was Subhan-Subhan, the cabin boy. Spit Fyre regarded the green sky-trail impassively, but the boy leaped to his feet and hurtled down to the encampment in a shower of sand. At the foot of the dune Subhan-

Subhan threw the Egg of the Orm into a roaring fire to kick-start its incubation. As the Egg lay untouched within the flames, he took a small gold box from his pocket and from it he removed a tiny gold **Egg Timer**, of which one half was filled with minute grains of silver. Subhan-Subhan pressed his thumb onto the top of the timer and watched the first speck of silver fall through.

On board the *Tristan*, Oraton-Marr set his own identical **Egg Timer** running. The countdown had begun.





PART II

NINETY-SIX HOURS TO HATCHING

DRAGON WATCH

It was just before dawn, and Spit Fyre was on edge. This was the time when, in the dragon's experience, humans did secret things. From the top of his dune, Spit Fyre had a magnificent view. To the west, a gibbous moon was traveling through the star-dusted indigo sky, dropping slowly to Earth to meet the white ribbon of ocean that glimmered along the horizon. Silhouetted in the moonlight were the squat, square shapes of the port where, some twelve weeks ago, he had made landfall.

To the east, Spit Fyre saw the darkness of a vast, unpeopled desert. He knew that just over the horizon—for he had seen it as he had flown into the port—lay a sprawling city of red stone. A faint glow rose up from it, which at this time of night could easily be mistaken for the sunrise.

But Spit Fyre was not on his dune to enjoy the view. He was there to guard the Egg of the Orm—the egg that he had watched his **Imprintor**, Septimus Heap, pursue only to be struck down by a **Darke Dart** for his trouble. Spit Fyre had no doubt that Septimus would return for the Egg, and when he did Spit Fyre was determined that Septimus would find his dragon waiting. Over the long weeks of watching, Spit Fyre had gradually entered a trancelike state. He had stopped moving, eating or drinking. His scales had become roughened by the sun and caked with sand, and it was now the opinion of those in the camp below that Oraton-Marr had turned him to stone. This suited Spit Fyre well. He would move when the time was right—and not before. It amused him to sit motionless while the occasional brave visitor wandered up to stare at him or even dared to pat his sandy scales. He had been less amused by one of the deckhands poking his belly with a stick, but Spit Fyre had restrained himself. Only his red-ringed, emerald-green eyes moved—and then only when he was sure no one was looking.

The dragon's eyes now surveyed the encampment below, lying in the moon shadow of the dune. It was inhabited by the usual range of humans: some good, some bad and some who hadn't yet made their minds up which to be. The humans lay sleeping in a motley collection of tents. In the center was a large, circular tent of faded blue covered in silver stars. Like planets orbiting the sun, a scattering of smaller tents was ranged around it, dark colors all bar one, which was white and round like the moon. A well-trodden path led from the tents to a dark pool of water that welled up from a spring in the rocks deep below. In it the dragon saw the reflection of the stars, glittering silver in deep black. Beside the pool were a small vegetable patch, two olive trees, soft succulents and a broad, flat slab of rock where clothes were laid to dry.

Spit Fyre turned his gaze to the moon tent in which he knew lay the Egg of the Orm, accompanied by Mysor, the Apothecary's Apprentice, and Subhan-Subhan, who was known by all as the Egg Boy. The Egg now spent the day covered in hot sand, being turned every hour by the Egg Boy. At night the white tent was erected over the Egg, and Subhan-Subhan wrapped the Egg in furs and slept beside it, conserving its heat, guarding the Egg with his life and—with the help of Mysor—waking to turn it every third hour, until the day it hatched. Only the Egg Boy and Oraton-Marr with their synchronized **Egg Timers** knew when this day would be. Even the occupant of the Egg was not entirely sure, although it was beginning to feel a strange restlessness.

That night, after its midnight turn, the Orm embryo had added another fold to its flat little brain and it now felt an itch on the end of its stumpy snout where the egg tooth was beginning to break through its skin. It would not be long now.

Outside, the desert air held its breath and Spit Fyre watched, still as stone.

KAZNIM NA-DRAA

Inside the star tent the stillness was broken by the gentle rise and fall of a large mound of furs, beneath which Karamander Draa, the Apothecary, was sleeping. The only other occupant, the Apothecary's elder daughter, Kaznim Na-Draa, lay wide-awake. Her gaze wandered around the peaceful space she knew as home. A single candle burned in a dish of scented water set in the middle of the rug-strewn floor. Its soft light showed books piled along the sides of the tent, a scattering of cushions around a low table on which a bowl of dates and a jug were set ready for breakfast. The jewel-like glass of blue and green potion bottles in neatly stacked boxes near the door glinted in the light of the steady flame and looked just like the jelly sweets from the Red City that Kaznim loved so much. She watched her mother's soft breathing for a while but avoided looking at the empty cot set at the foot of her mother's bed. Whenever she thought about her half-sister, Bubba, Kaznim felt as though she had swallowed a small cactus. It *hurt*.

After some minutes gathering her courage, Kaznim sat up, and, with several covert glances at her mother to check that she was still sleeping, she dressed quietly.

As a sliver of orange sun tipped above the distant horizon, Spit Fyre saw a movement in the wall of the star-strewn tent. He saw a small, dark-haired girl in a long red coat wriggling out from underneath the canvas and hopping awkwardly as she pulled on a pair of leather sandals. She set off toward the Egg tent, stopped outside and stood with her head tilted in thought. She slipped off her sandals and then, to the dragon's surprise, she

simply faded away. Spit Fyre blinked, wondering if he had just woken from a dream. But the sandals outside the tent told him otherwise.

In her hand Kaznim clutched the **UnSeen Charm** that the sorcerer who had brought the Egg and stolen her little sister had given her. It was beautifully wrapped inside a pale blue origami bird so that the opal pebble **Charm** formed the fat little belly of the bird. Kaznim loved the bird almost more than the **Charm**, even though she knew the sorcerer had made the bird himself with his own long, thin fingers and sharp, pointed nails. Kaznim knew it was a bribe to get her to spy on her mother. There was no way she would *ever* do that, but even so, she had accepted it because she had loved the little blue bird so much. Kaznim remembered how the sorcerer had presented it to her with the words: “For you, my dear. You can hide from anyone with this—except from *me*.” She had taken the bird and stuffed it deep into her pocket where her mother would never find it.

Kaznim was looking for her tortoise. The Egg Boy had stolen it—she *knew* he had. She did not hold out much hope of finding the tortoise in the Egg tent, but she had to check. Kaznim stood **UnSeen** in the dim hush of the tent and listened to the Egg Boy’s snuffles and the slow breathing of the Apprentice. She had never been inside the Egg tent before. Subhan-Subhan had sneeringly said that girls were bad luck inside a hatching tent and besides, her terrified mother had forbidden her from going in.

Now that she was inside, Kaznim did not see what all the fuss was about. The tent was hot and stuffy in order to keep the Egg warm through the cold desert night. All she could see of the Egg was a bump covered in a black fur with the Egg Boy curled around it like a fat white maggot. Her mother’s apprentice, Mysor—whose thankless task was to wake the Egg Boy every three hours and bring him anything he wanted whenever he wanted it—was hidden beneath a pile of thick blankets beside the door. Kaznim tiptoed past him and looked at the fur pelt that covered the Egg. She longed to lift it and see the beautiful gold-streaked blue of the Egg’s lapis skin, but she did not dare. She reminded herself that she had come for her tortoise, nothing else.

Kaznim dropped to her hands and knees and crawled across the rugs, patting them gently to see if there were any tortoise-shaped lumps. As she had expected, there were none. She got slowly to her feet and looked down at the Egg Boy, thinking that no one would ever guess how spiteful he was

when he was awake. As if aware that he was being watched, the Egg Boy stirred and Kaznim stepped hurriedly back—onto something hard. She nearly screamed—*she had trodden on her tortoise*.

Kaznim dropped to her knees with a soft thump and Mysor opened his eyes. She froze, hoping that her **UnSeen** was still working. Mysor stared straight at her and did not react. Kaznim shivered; it was a strange feeling to have someone look through you. She waited until Mysor closed his eyes again and then, terrified of finding a crushed tortoise, she gingerly pushed her hand beneath the rug toward the lump, which was worryingly flat. Her fingers closed around something cold and sharp-edged, and she pulled out a beautiful gold box. Kaznim smiled with relief—it was not a squashed tortoise. The Egg Boy mumbled something in his sleep and Kaznim hurriedly shoved the box into the pocket of her tunic and slipped out of the tent. It served the Egg Boy right, she thought. She *knew* he had taken her tortoise, and so she would take his precious box.

Spit Fyre saw a square of gold float out of the tent and then one of the sandals rise into the air, quickly followed by the other. He watched the sandals walk away as if they had got tired of waiting for their owner, while a lone golden box hovered above them. The dragon closed his eyes for a few seconds and when he opened them the girl had appeared. The sandals were now covered by her feet and the gold box was hidden in a pocket in her long red coat. Spit Fyre watched the small, slight figure walk away from the encampment and head out into the emptiness of the desert and the sunrise beyond.

TORTOISE HUNT

Kaznim hurried on, looking carefully for any telltale mounds of sand, which the long, slanting shadows of the sunrise would show. “Ptolemy . . .” she whispered, pronouncing her tortoise’s name: *Tollemey*. “Ptolemy, where are you?” Kaznim knew she had to be very alert to have any chance of finding the tortoise. Ptolemy was not big—he fit comfortably in two cupped hands—and he moved fast. Once the sun had warmed the sand he would be awake and off for another day’s hike. By the end of the day he would be miles away and lost forever.

Kaznim had looked for the tortoise all the previous afternoon, but when at dusk she had returned tortoise-less to find the Egg Boy putting up the Egg tent for the night, his smirk told her that he had something to do with Ptolemy’s disappearance. When Kaznim accused him of stealing her tortoise he had told her that that he had seen Ptolemy out by “the singing pit.” Kaznim knew at once that the only reason Ptolemy would be so far away and in such a dangerous place was if Subhan-Subhan had actually taken him there. Or was the Egg Boy bluffing—was it a ruse to get her trapped in the sinking sands of the Pit of the Singing Sands? Either way there had been nothing she could do that evening. By now the tortoise would, in his own small way, be doing the same thing as the setting sun—digging himself into the sand for the night. She would never find him, and besides, it was far too dangerous with the sand lions waking for their nighttime hunting. All Kaznim could do was to retreat into the star tent and plan Ptolemy’s rescue and her revenge.

And now, she thought as her hand closed around the gold box, she had her revenge. Now the Egg Boy, too, would know how it felt to lose something precious. It served him right.

Kaznim walked quickly across the sand, leaving an unwavering line of footprints in her wake. On the far horizon she saw tall dunes rising like a swelling sea before a storm, dark against the strip of bright dawn sky. A little spooked by the vastness that lay before her, Kaznim turned to look back at her tent and saw the first rays of the rising sun catch its silver stars, sending them shimmering against the faded blue. She caught her breath. Her home looked beautiful. She thought of the hateful Egg Boy and she wished the Egg would hurry up and hatch so that her little sister would return and he would go away and leave her in peace with her mother, her tortoise, Bubba and Mysor.

Kaznim thought of her mother asleep in her bed of furs. She had left a note using the name she called her mother when no one was listening:

*Dear Ammaa,
I have gone to find my tortoise. I will be home soon.
Your daughter,
Kaznim*

Kaznim hoped that she would be back with her tortoise well before Ammaa read it. Ever since Bubba had been taken, her mother panicked if Kaznim went anywhere on her own.

The sun was rising fast now and Kaznim broke into a run. She knew she must reach the Pit of the Singing Sands before the warmth of the sun woke Ptolemy. The tortoise moved surprisingly fast, and soon he would look like just another distant rock shimmering in the heat haze. Ten minutes later, Kaznim had reached the pit. Once again, she looked back at the star tent; it seemed so far away that she felt a twinge of homesickness. She longed to be pulling back the door hangings, stepping into its cool shadows with her tortoise in her arms. *But first, Kaznim, she told herself firmly, you have to find him.*

THE PIT OF THE SINGING SANDS

The Pit of the Singing Sands was a large circle of unstable sand—a treacherous place where no one trod for fear of falling through to who knew where. But the early-morning sun made it relatively safe, for the slanting shadows showed where the solid ground beneath the sand abruptly stopped. That morning, the circle of the sand inside was quite a few inches lower than the solid rim and as Kaznim looked at it—hoping that Ptolemy had not decided to bed down there for the night—she saw the grains undulating as though some great beast was stirring below. It took all Kaznim’s courage not to turn and run for the safety of the star tent. Heart pounding, she stood back from the edge and scanned the sand, watching for the telltale upward push of sand that would herald a tortoise greeting a new day.

A sudden flurry no more than a few feet away caught Kaznim’s eye and her heart leaped—*something in the Pit was moving*. A waft of fine dust puffed up into the gentle morning breeze and landed softly. There was another, more purposeful movement and at last Kaznim saw what she had been waiting for. A scaly, flat brown head with a perfectly round, bright black eye poked up from the white sand.

“Ptolemy!” Kaznim called out with relief.

Slow and deliberate in the cool of the morning, the tortoise pushed his way up and sat blinking in the sunlight. Kaznim squatted down and held out a small sliver of coconut, which she knew Ptolemy could not resist. “Ptolemy,” she whispered encouragingly. “Ptolemy, come here. Come on, Ptolemy. Over here.”

The tortoise stuck his head out and regarded Kaznim with a quizzical air. Then, very deliberately, he turned and stomped away—farther into the circle.

Kaznim jumped up in frustration. “Ptolemy!” she called out. “This way. *Ptolemy!*” But the tortoise continued his onward trundle.

Carefully keeping firm sand below her feet, Kaznim circled the pit, heading for the other side, toward which Ptolemy was advancing at some speed. Tortoise and girl were converging when the singing began. A high-pitched keening drifted out of the pit: “*Aaaaaiiiiiiiiiaaaaaaeeeeeeee . . .*” And like dancers whose tune had at last begun, the grains of sand on the top began to swirl.

Kaznim stopped dead. The hairs on the back of her neck rose. Late-night campfire stories of nightmare creatures emerging from the pit came back to her, and had it not been for Ptolemy, she would have turned and run. But the tortoise was still doggedly making its way to the edge of the pit. And so, going against all her instincts, Kaznim ran toward the Pit of the Singing Sands—away from her home, away from the place where she was safe, toward danger. She was not leaving without that stupid, pig-headed tortoise.

Dust rose in a fine mist, catching in her throat. Kaznim wound her long red cotton scarf around her mouth and nose, and crouching on the very edge of the firm sand, she willed Ptolemy to speed up and get near enough for her to reach.

The tortoise was almost there when he suddenly dropped, as if into a hole. It was no more than a few inches down, but it spooked him. He pulled in his head and feet and sat like a stubborn rock. Desperately, Kaznim threw the piece of coconut at him. Its only effect was to make the tortoise gather himself more tightly into his shell. A soft *susssisssisssisssisssusssisss* of sand began and to her horror Kaznim saw the sand within the pit begin to slowly swirl, like water going down a drain. Ptolemy began to sink.

Kaznim could bear it no longer. She threw herself forward as though she were diving for a ball. She sank deep into the soft sand but her outstretched hands caught hold of Ptolemy’s cool, hard shell and did not let go. Snakelike, Kaznim began to shuffle backward toward the safety of the edge of the pit, but as her feet touched the rim, the sand shifted beneath her and

became as thin as water. Kaznim tumbled down, down, down through the sand, into the depths of the Pit of the Singing Sands.

THE APOTHECARY'S TENT

The Apothecary was woken by the *Aaaaaiiiiiiiiiaaaaaaeeeeeeee . . .* of the singing sands. She sat up fast, convinced that a mischievous Sand Spirit had slipped into the tent. But as the traces of sleep left her, Karamander Draa realized that this was no Spirit. She had heard the sands once before and knew what she must do—keep still and silent so that whatever emerged from the pit heard no sign of human life.

“Kaznim,” she whispered across to the mound of blankets piled onto her daughter’s bed. “Do not be afraid. Keep very quiet. Lie still. It will soon pass.” The blankets stayed obediently quiet and still. A soft smile touched the Apothecary’s face. Kaznim was so brave, so calm in the face of danger—no one would know she was there.

Some ten minutes later the wailing of the sands at last subsided. “Kaznim,” Karamander whispered in a low voice. “All is well. You can come out of your burrow now.”

But Kaznim’s burrow was unresponsive. A worm of worry twisted in Karamander’s stomach—the bedclothes looked wrong somehow. She got up and began to walk over to her daughter’s bed. By the time she was halfway across the rug-strewn floor, Karamander was running. She already knew the truth—*Kaznim was not there*.

“Kaznim! Kaznim!” Karamander pulled the blankets from the bed, threw them to the floor and raced to the door. With trembling hands she unlaced the door flap and stumbled outside into the early-morning sun. Karamander ran from tent to tent, throwing open the door flaps, shouting for her daughter. She left the Egg tent until last.

Two figures, bleary in the stuffy atmosphere, sat up. “Wharr?” asked Mysor, his husky voice breaking as he spoke. The smaller figure jumped up guiltily. Mistakenly thinking he had overslept and was late for the first turn of the day, Subhan-Subhan leaned against the Egg and expertly twisted it through a quarter-turn.

“Mysor!” Karamander barked. “Out! Now!”

In seconds the disheveled Apothecary Apprentice was blinking in the sunlight. Mysor was thin and tall with short, dark curly hair, clear blue eyes and a dislike for waking up.

“Kaznim’s gone,” Karamander said. “I need help.”

Mysor was suddenly wide-awake. “Gone?” he asked. “Where?”

“I don’t *know* where she’s gone,” Karamander said desperately. “But the pit was singing.”

“Oh.” Now Mysor was as worried as his Master.

Karamander began to run. Her long red nightgown flowed out as her bare feet sped across the sand, heading toward the distant dust cloud that hung over the Pit of the Singing Sands. Mysor’s long stride caught up with her easily. “Stop!” he said, in a commanding voice that surprised himself as much as Karamander. “I ask pardon, Apothecary. But we must be mindful. The desert gives signs to those who look. But they do not last long. Let us pause a moment and observe.”

Karamander regarded her Apprentice with something near respect. “Yes. Yes, of course. You are right. Tracks. There will be tracks.”

Mysor half closed his eyes and moved his head from side to side, scanning the sand. It was an old desert trick, designed to blur out the detail and show the structure below. Beneath the freshly blown sand he saw the ghost of a long, straight trail of footprints heading for the pit. He looked at the Apothecary. She had seen them too.

“So. She went to the pit,” Karamander said flatly. She shaded her eyes against the glare. Beyond the dust cloud she saw nothing but empty sands. Her daughter had vanished. “But why? Why would she go there, of all places?”

“I . . . I don’t know.” Mysor was not one to tell tales, but he knew that yesterday, Subhan-Subhan had walked to the pit. He had been up to something, Mysor was sure of that. Karamander followed his glance back to the Egg tent.

“If that brat has done anything to my daughter, I will . . .” She trailed off, knowing she was powerless. The safety of her other daughter depended on the Egg Boy doing his job properly, and Karamander dared do nothing to jeopardize the hatching of the tyrannical Egg. With heavy hearts, Karamander and Mysor followed Kaznim’s footprints as they headed toward the Pit of the Singing Sands. They both knew they were walking into emptiness.

Far behind them, a pale moon-face peered out from the Egg tent. The Egg Boy smiled. Stupid tortoise, he thought—so easy to take to the pit and toss in. And stupid girl, too—so easy to fool. The Egg Boy slipped back into the stifling heat of the tent and went over to the beautiful lapis-blue egg that only he, Subhan-Subhan, long-lost son of a tribe of Orm keepers, had the skills to incubate. At least, that was what the sorcerer had told him, and he believed it, even if no one else did. Subhan ran his hand over the Egg’s smooth, warm surface. He was glad that the annoying girl would never see it hatch. She did not deserve to be in the presence of a Great Orm. He wondered how the little Orm inside would be changing today and reached beneath the rug to find his precious box.

It was not there.

Five minutes later all the rugs were heaped outside the Egg tent and Subhan was scrabbling frantically in the sandy floor. *Where was the Egg Box?*

On the edge of the Pit of the Singing Sands, Karamander Draa stared at the abrupt end of her daughter’s faint, windblown tracks. She gazed at the mass of soft sand and the dust cloud hanging over it that they led into. There were no tracks leading away from the Pit, and the desert beyond was empty. There was no doubt about it. The Pit had taken her daughter.

Mysor waited silently while Karamander turned and gazed back at Kaznim’s footprints, which walked toward her from the tent. He saw her watching them grow ever fainter as the early-morning breeze blew away the last precious echoes of her child. When the footprints were gone, Karamander slumped to the ground and broke into cries so loud that even in the midst of his panic, Subhan-Subhan had to stuff his fingers into his ears.

PTOLEMY

Ptolemy was not as stupid as Subhan-Subhan thought. From the moment the Egg Boy had snatched him from his favorite patch of milk thistle and thrown him up into the air like a ball, the tortoise had understood that the boy wished him ill. And when the boy had shoved him into his pocket—during which Ptolemy had had the satisfaction of biting his finger—the tortoise knew that something bad was going to happen. He heard Subhan-Subhan check that Kaznim was still busy at her lessons and then felt him hurrying away from the encampment. Tortoises have been around long enough to understand that not all human beings are well intentioned, and Ptolemy also knew that human beings find tortoises very good to eat, especially when cooked slowly in a deep sand oven. He knew that Subhan-Subhan was always hungry, and the tortoise gloomily expected this was going to be his fate. When at last Subhan-Subhan took him out of his sticky pocket, Ptolemy sighed and the air whistled into his nostrils like a tiny desert squall. So when he had found himself flying through the air once more and heading downward toward the Pit of the Singing Sands, the tortoise felt a sense of relief. He landed hard and sank deep into the loose sand. By the time he had worked his way up to the surface, his tormentor was gone and the sun was sinking fast toward the horizon. Ptolemy decided to stay put for the night. He buried himself so that he was hidden from the night eagles (whose joy was to snatch up a tortoise, fly high into the air with it and drop it from a great height onto a rock) and settled down to sleep. He would set off back to the star tent as soon as the sun rose.

When Ptolemy awoke the next morning he saw Kaznim hovering beside the circle of treacherous sand. Ptolemy understood that the pit was dangerous for humans and he had tried to lead her away from the edge. He had very nearly succeeded, but humans do not have the patience of a tortoise. They are new and quick and the young ones in particular seem to act without any thought. And so, when the sands began to move and Kaznim jumped into them to rescue him, Ptolemy was not surprised. But he doubted it would do either of them any good.

Ptolemy felt Kaznim's hands close around his shell; he sensed their warmth and their strength—so different from the Egg Boy's spiteful grasp—and he felt safe. But it was short-lived. As tortoise and girl tumbled down through the sand, grit and the dust filled their ears, eyes and noses, and they began to choke.

Kaznim was too pleased to have her tortoise in her arms to realize her danger, and by the time she did, they had crashed to the ground. Kaznim pulled the tortoise close and rolled with the fall, just as she practiced in her dune-diving lessons. But the sand that had spiraled up and opened to let them fall was now coming back to earth, and the cloud was getting so thick that Kaznim knew that soon she would no longer be able to breathe. She staggered to her feet, tucked the tortoise under her arm and pushed her way through the falling sand. She thought she could see the shape of an archway ahead. If only she could reach that, she would be out of this falling thickness; she would be able to breathe again.

But her breath was full of dust, her nose plugged with sand. Her head felt light and sparkles began to dance before her eyes. Kaznim knew she was about to pass out. And when she did, the sand would bury her and Ptolemy and they would be dead—and what would Ammaa do then? Kaznim took one last sand-filled breath and staggered toward the arch. Suddenly she saw two shadows appear. Four arms reached out, took hold of her and swept Kaznim and her tortoise into the darkness.

MARWICK AND SAM

Kaznim had the strangest sensation of traveling at breakneck speed. For a moment she thought that she and Ptolemy had fallen into another pit, and she braced herself for the landing. But the strong arms still held her tight and Kaznim realized that she was not falling, but moving rapidly forward. She began to slow down, and moments later, she was in a tunnel walking toward dappled green light framed by the shape of an archway. The arms still held her tightly and Kaznim risked a glance at her captors. She saw two young men towering over her: one with dark matted hair and a wild look in his eyes; one—whose grip, Kaznim noticed, was much weaker—had fair, tangled curls and a deathly pallor to his skin.

Kaznim had heard many stories of desert children being taken for slaves, and her fear of falling was quickly replaced by the fear that she had been kidnapped. She readied herself to make a break for it as soon as she could. As they emerged into a circular garden with arches in its walls, the young men let go of her arms. Immediately Kaznim shot off, heading toward another arch.

“Hey!” yelled the young man with the matted hair. “Not that one! Jeez!” He raced after her and the next thing Kaznim knew, there was a hand snatching the back of her tunic and pulling her away. Kaznim kicked out. They weren’t going to get her that easily.

“Whoa!” said her captor. “Ouch! Steady on. I’m only trying to help.” There was something about the voice that made Kaznim stop struggling. It sounded genuine, like Mysor did when he was explaining something.

“Hey, that’s better. If you run into that one you’ll end up somewhere not nice at all. Here, sit down. You look rough, kiddo.”

Kaznim thought the young man looked pretty rough himself. His clothes were bloodstained, ragged and filthy, but his brown eyes seemed friendly and she allowed herself to be led to a patch of soft grass where the other young man was already slumped. He did not look good. His tangled, straw-colored curly hair was sticky with blood; his wispy beard was full of grit, but even so his bright green eyes had a faint smile in them. His companion hung back a little now, his dark brown eyes flicking to and fro restlessly, checking out the arches as if he were on guard. Both young men looked as though they had been in a fight and now Kaznim saw that the fair-haired one had a wide, heavily bloodstained bandage wrapped around his middle and a long gash on the outside of his right arm, which was bound with strips of twine, as if to keep the edges together. The dark-haired one seemed to have fared better. His face was bruised and there was blood on his tunic, but he had no dramatic bandages.

“You’re hurt,” Kaznim said shyly to the fair-haired young man.

He nodded and winced in pain at the movement.

“Would you like my tortoise?” she asked.

The young man managed a wan smile and slowly shook his head.

Kaznim did not feel brave enough to explain about Ptolemy. She put the tortoise down on the grass and all three fell silent as they watched him slowly uncurl and poke his head out into the sun.

Kaznim began to relax and take in her surroundings. The garden had obviously been neglected for many years, for it was very overgrown with creepers climbing up the walls and long, rough grass sprouting up from what was once thick paving. The walls rose high—about twenty feet—into the air and within them were many more arches like the one they had come out of, each with one or two letters inscribed into its keystone. Kaznim counted twelve altogether. It was a beautiful, peaceful place and had the air of somewhere that had once been much loved. The only slightly disconcerting thing was a regular rumble that came up through the ground every few seconds. It felt to Kaznim as though a great monster were breathing beneath them. But the breath was slow, so, she told herself, the monster must be sleeping.

In the middle of the circular garden was a small spring. It bubbled up into an old copper bowl around which were paving stones worn smooth by centuries of footfall. Kaznim was watching the dark-haired young man kneel down at the spring and fill a battered metal bottle with cool water, when suddenly a husky voice spoke beside her.

“Nice tortoise.”

“He is called Ptolemy,” Kaznim said.

“Good name . . . for a . . . tortoise. I’m . . . Sam. Heap.”

“Hello, Sam Heap,” Kaznim said, slowly trying out the unfamiliar words.

“And I am called Marwick,” said the young man with the water bottle, joining them.

“I am Kaznim Na-Draa.” Kaznim smiled. She remembered how her mother would always tell her to make polite conversation after being introduced to people, but all she could think of to say was, “Where are we?”

“Good question,” Marwick said. “Right now, I have no idea.” He pulled a flimsy, much-folded piece of paper from his tunic and spread it out upon the blanket. On it was drawn a network of fine lines and tiny circles that made no sense at all to Kaznim. Marwick stabbed a long, dirty finger with a bloodied knuckle onto one of the circles. “We are here, I think,” he said.

Kaznim peered at the paper. “But where is that?” she asked. “Where in the world, I mean.”

“A small island far off the long coast of the Blue Mountains,” Marwick said. “With any luck.” He looked at Sam. “And if it is, there’s no way they can get us.”

Sam grimaced. “Let’s hope . . . not,” he murmured.

Kaznim was puzzled. “But how can we be on an island?” she asked. “We haven’t gone across the sea.”

Marwick smiled. “Ah,” he said. “But we have. We have traveled through an Ancient Way. You see, Kaznim, the Ancient Ways are—” The cry of a gull broke into Marwick’s explanation, and he grinned. “Looks like I’m right, Sammo,” he said. “And listen . . . I can hear . . . Yes, I can hear surf.”

“What is surf?” Kaznim asked.

“It is the waves of the ocean pounding on a beach,” Marwick told her.

Kaznim now understood what the sleeping monster really was. She took a deep breath in and realized she tasted salt. Suddenly she felt a long way from home. She thought of her mother waking up to find she was not in her bed—which would, she thought, be happening just about *now*. Kaznim thought of Ammaa staring at *two* empty beds with both her daughters gone, and she could not bear to stay in the garden a moment longer. She snatched up Ptolemy—much to the tortoise’s disgust, for he was halfway through a tasty yellow flower—and jumped to her feet. “Sam Heap and Marwick, thank you very much for rescuing me,” Kaznim said rather formally. “I would like to go home now. I would be very grateful if you could show me which Ancient Way to take.”

Sam’s and Marwick’s expressions told Kaznim that she had not asked for something easy. Or even possible. Marwick got to his feet. “I’m sorry, Kaznim,” he said. “But you came through what we call an unstable Hub.”

Kaznim frowned. “A what?” she asked.

Marwick waved his arm around their sunken garden. “This,” he said, “is a stable Hub. It is in a place where people may come and go at all times. But not all are like this. Some Hubs have sunk beneath the ocean. Some are ice-bound, some are deep in snow and some, like yours, are full of sand. Of course, Hubs of ice or in the ocean can never be used, but those full of sand or snow will, in a wild Way wind, occasionally clear. But they soon fill up again. The Hub you fell into is an especially deep one. There is no way we can get back up through all that sand.” Marwick shook his head. “No way at all.”

Kaznim stared at him, trying to understand. “You mean I can’t go home?”

“Well, of course you can go home. But we would have to figure out which Hub is nearest to you, and then you could travel overland from there. Where do you live, Kaznim?”

“In the star tent beside the Moon Pool, beneath the long dune.”

Marwick looked puzzled. “So, where’s that?” he asked.

“Um. In the desert,” said Kaznim. “The Desert of the Singing Sands.”

“Okay . . . and whereabouts is that?”

Kaznim shook her head. “I . . . I don’t know.”

GOING HOME

Kaznim sat clutching Ptolemy tightly. The tortoise's sharp-clawed legs churned powerfully against her stomach, but Kaznim took no notice. She was desolate—and mortified. How could she *not* know where she lived? What a baby she was. She had spent all her life that she could remember in the star-spangled tent at the foot of the long dune but she had no idea where in the world it was. Kaznim looked down at Ptolemy, who had now withdrawn peevishly into his shell. *It's all right for you, she thought. You have your home with you. I've lost mine. And I have no idea how to find it.*

Sam watched the tears spring into Kaznim's eyes—such a dark blue that they were nearly purple—and he sat up and put his good arm around her slight shoulders. She reminded him of his little sister at that age. “Don't worry,” he said. “Me . . . and Marwick will look after you. We're . . . trying to find our way home too.”

Kaznim was shocked. “Don't you know where you live either?” she asked Sam.

Sam lay back, exhausted by his effort. Marwick looked at him with concern.

“I'm okay,” said Sam.

“No, you're not,” Marwick retorted. “You need to rest, Sammo.” He turned to Kaznim. “We're like you,” he said. “We know where we live, but we're not sure how to get there. We got lost a few years ago now.”

“*Years?*” asked Kaznim, dismayed. It seemed that Sam and Marwick were as silly as she was. The thought that it might be years before she saw her mother again made the tears silently overflow and run down her cheeks.

“But it’s only been years because we got stuck in a prison,” Marwick explained hurriedly.

Kaznim stared at Marwick. “In *prison*?”

Marwick grinned. “Hey, don’t worry, you’re not stuck with a couple of murderers. We were prisoners of war. Got caught up in someone’s battle. Never did understand what it was about, did we, Sam?”

“Nah,” Sam muttered. “They were both . . . as bad as each other.”

“They were,” Marwick agreed. “But it didn’t help when you told them that.”

Sam looked sheepish.

Kaznim smiled shyly. “It’s good they let you go,” she said.

Marwick grimaced. “They didn’t. We escaped. Had a bit of a fight on the way out.” He changed the subject. “Right, we need to get Sammo home. Let’s have a proper look at that map.”

Ptolemy stuck his two back legs hard into Kaznim’s stomach. “Ouch!” she gasped, and put the tortoise back among the yellow flowers.

Marwick laid his flimsy map on the grass in front of Kaznim, then pulled a very battered, small notebook from his pocket and opened it. Kaznim saw that it was full of lists of letters, rather like the ones inscribed above the arches that led from the garden. She watched Marwick trace his finger along the lines on the map, stopping at each circle and writing down a number in his notebook. At last, when the list seemed very long, he stopped, sat up and said to Sam, “Fifteen Hubs. Can’t do it in any less, Sammo. Sorry.”

“No . . . problem,” Sam said.

Marwick frowned. Kaznim could see he thought fifteen Hubs *was* a problem. She guessed it meant that Sam would have to walk a long way. Marwick turned to her and said, “We’re going back to the Castle. Sam needs to get proper help, fast.” Kaznim nodded. She understood that. “Someone there will be sure to know where your home is,” Marwick said. “And when we find out, I’ll take you there. That’s a promise, okay?”

Kaznim smiled. Marwick was a good person, she thought. If the Castle was full of people as nice as Marwick, it would be a lovely place to visit—but another time. Right now all she wanted to do was to get back home to her mother. She couldn’t bear to think how upset she must be. “How long will it take to get to the Castle?” she asked anxiously.

Marwick sighed. “It’s a tricky journey. The Castle lies on the edge of the system. And a lot of the Ways near there don’t work anymore. So let’s get going. The sooner we go, the sooner we get there.”

With some difficulty, Marwick helped Sam to his feet. The small amount of color in Sam’s face drained away, and he swayed precariously.

“You can lean on me,” Kaznim offered.

Sam managed a smile. “Thanks . . . but I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Marwick told Sam. “You lean on Kaznim like she said.”

Once again Ptolemy was whisked away from his flowers and tucked under an arm. The tortoise drew in his head with a sharp hiss of annoyance. With Sam leaning on Kaznim’s right shoulder and Marwick’s left arm holding him up, they made their way slowly across the grass toward another of the strangely dark arches. Marwick stopped at its mouth and smiled at Kaznim. “Ready?” he asked.

Kaznim nodded nervously.

“We’ll walk in together, just as we are now. We will go along a short tunnel and step into a weird misty patch. It will feel a bit strange, as though you are moving very fast, which of course you are, because you are traveling along an Ancient Way. But all you have to do is keep walking steadily, and hang on to Sam. Then we’ll come out into another Hub—a place a bit like this, with twelve more arches. And then we’ll go into another arch. We just carry on like that and if all my numbers work out we’ll end up in the Castle. Okay?”

Kaznim smiled. “Okay,” she said.

“I just hope that all the Hubs are navigable,” Marwick muttered to himself, looking anxiously at Sam.

The trio walked beneath the arch and headed into the chill of a dank tunnel, moving slowly toward the strange white mist that hovered ahead.

“Here we go,” said Marwick. They stepped into the mist and entered the Ancient Way.

Kaznim lost count of the number of Hubs they walked, waded, slipped and slid across. Marwick had to take them on two detours and it felt like hours later when he said, “Nearly there. Only one more Hub to go.” But it was in the very last Hub that they hit their final and biggest obstacle. As they emerged from the mist and walked down the tunnel, the weight of Sam

heavy on them both, they saw at the end of the tunnel a bright, shimmering purple light. As they drew close, Kaznim saw that the light was stretched over the arch like a skin. She thought she could hear a faint buzzing coming from it, like a fly trapped in a jar.

“Don’t touch,” Marwick warned. Gingerly, Marwick put out his hand to the purple light. Kaznim could tell by the way he rested his hand on it that the light had a physical presence—it actually was a tough skin stretched like a drum across the archway. Marwick spun around. “I don’t believe it!” he said despairingly. “Marcia’s **Sealed** it.”

“Sealed?” Sam mumbled. “What, like a *Magyk Seal*?”

“Yeah,” said Marwick.

With a soft groan, Sam Heap slid to the ground and slumped against the wall like a dummy with the stuffing half gone. His eyes were closed, and in the eerie purple light his face was a deathly blue.

Marwick dropped to his knees beside his friend. “Sammo,” he whispered. “Sammo, wake up. *Please*. We’re very nearly there.” Kaznim watched Marwick put his hand on Sam’s bandage and take it away again. It was dark with blood. “We’re so close,” he said. “So close.” He gently tapped Sam’s face and Sam’s eyes flickered open. “Stay awake, Sammo. Stay awake for me. *Please. Please.*”

Sam struggled to keep his eyes open but Kaznim knew he was beginning to drift away. Marwick looked up at her in despair. “The Sick Bay is his only hope. And we can’t get past this **Seal**.” He got to his feet. “We’ll have to take him around the long way.” He shook his head in consternation, “At least four more Hubs to get back to where we are now.”

As a daughter of an Apothecary, there were things that Kaznim knew that Marwick did not. Kaznim saw the dull film covering Sam’s green eyes and she knew that Sam Heap had no hope of traveling through four more Hubs.





PART III

SEVENTY-FIVE HOURS TO HATCHING

SCRAMBLED EGG

Alice TodHunter Moon, *Apprentice to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard*, had been in the job for little more than two months. Alice—who liked to be called Tod—had spent most of that time feeling excited and confused in equal measures. Now she was headed for the early-morning Wizard Tower Moot and a new feeling of apprehension began to creep over her.

The Moot was a weekly meeting that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Septimus Heap, had recently set up. It was held in the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower very early on a Monday morning so it did not interfere with the rest of the day's schedule. The idea was that the Moot would focus on one particular issue at a time until it was resolved. Septimus reckoned that any problem could be worked out if enough Wizards thought about it—but he was yet to be proved right. The conundrum the Moot was trying to solve was the whereabouts of the Egg of the Orm. However, so far not one Wizard had come up with anything useful.

Tod was waiting in the shadows at the end of the Apprentice corridor beside the silver spiral stairs. Her short dark hair was neatly combed—unusual for Tod—and her long elflock hung down her back, plaited and tied with a green ribbon. The ribbon matched her still-pristine Apprentice robes, which Tod wore in the new fashion as a short woolen tunic, fastened by a silver Apprentice belt and green leggings. She had adopted the Wizard Tower habit of wearing boots lined with sheepskin in the winter, and today, because Tod wanted to look like a good Apprentice, their laces were also green. In her hand she held a small blue folder that she had painstakingly painted to look like lapis lazuli, on which she had written two short words: *Orm Egg*. With butterflies flapping in her stomach, Tod watched the stairs—which were still on slow nighttime mode—rotating downward. They carried a selection of the more pedantic Wizards who enjoyed meetings, along with some reptile experts, none of whom were speaking to one

another after a row the previous week about whether a newly hatched Orm ate its own egg sac. But it was not a good turnout; most Wizards had opted to stay in bed.

While Tod waited politely for a space on the stairs, she thought somewhat enviously of the other Apprentices in the junior dorms who were lucky enough to be having another hour's asleep. But as ExtraOrdinary Apprentice, Tod had much less freedom—she was expected to attend everything the ExtraOrdinary Wizard did. She was also expected to occasionally speak at meetings, and this was to be her first time. In fact, right then everything felt a little bit scary. There were rules she still did not understand and things she was afraid of doing wrong. The Wizard Tower sometimes felt like a big machine in which she was a very small cog. Resolutely, Tod pushed down a feeling of homesickness. At times like this she missed the simple life she had led in her PathFinder village far across the sea, but more than anything she missed her father, Dan Moon. And Tod knew he missed her too, far away in the house he had once shared with her and her mother, Cassi TodHunter Draa, who had died when Tod was little.

Tod's sad thoughts were interrupted by a friendly shout from above. "Alice, don't wait for me! Jump on!" It was Dr. Dandra Draa. An imposing woman with short dark hair through which ran a striking streak of white, Dr. Draa was the Sick Bay Wizard and Tod's guardian. Now that Tod was an Apprentice, Dandra insisted on calling her Alice, "It *is* your proper name," Dandra had told her. "And you should use it in your official capacity." But no one else called her Alice, not even the ExtraOrdinary Wizard—much to Dandra's disapproval.

Tod jumped onto the step just below Dandra.

Dandra smiled. She was pleased to see the blue folder and know that her protégée was taking her duties seriously, but she could not help being a little mischievous. "Ready for more scrambled egg?" she asked.

Tod grinned. "Scrambled egg" was the name the Apprentices had given the subject of the Moot. Now it seemed to have spread. "*Eggstremely* ready," said Tod.

"Alice, I do apologize," Dandra said, deadpan. She waited for a split second and then said, "I really shouldn't be *egging* you on."

Tod giggled. She loved Dandra's mixture of formality and fun.

The stairs took them from the dimness of the nighttime lights in the domestic part of the Wizard Tower down into the shockingly bright arena of the Great Hall, an impressively vaulted space on the ground floor. Here, seven tall columns reared up to meet high above at a point in the center of its shimmering blue ceiling, on which were scattered constellations of stars twinkling brightly. As Tod and Dandra progressed downward, the blue sky faded into a pale green, which in turn morphed into brightly colored pictures around the walls of the Great Hall. These showed scenes from the long history of the Wizard Tower and had been created with an ancient **Magyk**. They flickered in and out of focus, and where the **Magyk** grew thin, they faded into black and white. The Great Hall was achingly bright for so early in the morning and Tod wished that Septimus would—as he'd been requested to do by the more elderly Wizards—"turn it down a bit." But Septimus wanted everyone wide-awake on this dark winter morning.

Tod stepped off the stairs and as her foot touched the soft, sandlike surface of the **Magykal** floor, the multicolored words *GOOD MORNING*, *APPRENTICE* wandered through the grains at her feet and then *GOOD LUCK WITH THE SPEECH*, which was quickly followed by *GOOD MORNING, DR. DRAA*.

Serious nerves attacked Tod as she and Dandra made their way over to a young man wearing the heavy purple robes of the office of ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Septimus Heap looked up from a long, narrow table where he was leafing through a stack of papers. His straw-colored wavy hair was neatly tied back in a short ponytail and his bright green eyes flashed in the light when he smiled. "Tod, Dandra, good morning," he said. "I have a distinct feeling that today is the day we make the breakthrough. I sense a kind of . . ." He stopped and searched for the right word. "Er, *connection* with the Egg. As though it is somehow coming closer to us." Septimus became aware that Dr. Draa was looking at him as though he had fallen prey to a rather nasty illness. "I am perfectly all right, thank you, Dandra," he said testily.

"I am pleased to hear it, ExtraOrdinary," Dandra replied. "Although I am aware that the Delusion Bug is back in the Port. A very nasty virus."

"I'm sure it is," Septimus said. "But I am perfectly well, thank you."

"The delusion of perfect wellness is one of its symptoms," Dandra said gravely.

A flicker of worry passed across Septimus's face.

"Luckily," Dandra added, "the very first symptom of all is a rash of tiny blue spots on the nose."

Septimus knew his nose was blue-spot free. He resisted the temptation to stick his tongue out at Dandra Draa, but contented himself with an irritable "Huh!"

The hands on the new clock above the tall silver double doors that led out of the Wizard Tower showed six o'clock exactly. It was time for the Moot to begin. With an air of disappointment Septimus surveyed the sparse gathering: about twenty Wizards, three final year Apprentices who needed good attendance reports and Boris Catchpole, a thoroughly useless ex-sub-Wizard who was employed as doorman. Septimus did not include in his count the strange figure that lay upon the visitors' bench by the main door, fast asleep.

The sleeping figure—a long, willowy man dressed in beautiful white silk robes with gold sandals on his feet—had attracted a few amused glances from those at the Moot. He was, they knew, Septimus's jinnee, Jim Knee. Jim Knee was not usually seen in winter months due to his habit of going into hibernation under a large pile of soft quilts. But the previous night his Master had rudely awoken him from his deep sleep. Only the best gold upon his feet and the softest silk for his robes—and a risky relaxation of the rules between jinnee and Master, whereby Jim Knee was able to **Transform** into what he wanted, *when* he wanted—had persuaded Jim Knee to do as Septimus had commanded. Now, with his head upon his favorite goose-down pillow, the jinnee drifted back into a hazy doze, knowing that it was not going to last much longer.

Since becoming ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Septimus had discovered that it was only too easy to become overwhelmed by the huge amount of things he was meant to do. His solution had been to revert to his Young Army training: events were to begin and end *On Time, on the Chime* as the Young Army rhyme had it. Septimus had hated his time as a boy soldier, but he was surprised by how many aspects of his training he still found useful. The chime of the Great Hall clock having been silenced after complaints from those who lived immediately above, Septimus now picked up a small silver bell and rang it. The assembled gathering fell silent.

“Thank you for coming to the Moot,” Septimus began. “I am sorry there are not more of us here.” He paused and looked around. Aware that he needed to keep those who had bothered to turn up happy so that at least *they* would come to the next Moot, he continued, “But I see we have a pick of the crop here.”

An appreciative murmur ran through the assembled group.

“And I am sure that with such great skill and **Magykal** talent gathered here this morning, we will find the answer we are looking for.” Septimus smiled. “Since our Moot last week, my Apprentice and I have made some interesting discoveries. Tod, would you like to tell us all your results, please?”

Dandra caught her eye and smiled encouragingly. Tod fumbled with her blue folder and drew out a sheet of neat writing. Willing her hands to stop shaking, she read out the title.

“Conditions necessary to produce a successful human hatching of an Egg of the Great Orm.” She looked up and wished she hadn’t. All eyes were upon her. Behind the crowd she saw the tall silver doors from the outside opening and a figure in dark blue-and-gold robes hurrying in. It was Beetle, the Chief Hermetic Scribe. He nodded apologetically at Septimus and stayed quietly at the back. Flustered, Tod looked down at her piece of paper. She really liked Beetle and longed to impress him. Now she was even more anxious.

“I. Er. Um . . .” she floundered, overwhelmed by the expectant silence. It was a sudden sneeze from the Chief Hermetic Scribe that saved her. The noisiest sneeze that Tod had ever heard, it filled the Great Hall and all eyes turned disapprovingly to its owner. Another three sneezes followed fast upon its heels and Tod was surprised to see the Chief Hermetic Scribe turn a little pink.

“Ah . . . ahh . . . *TCHOO!* I’m sorry,” he said. “Really *terribly* sorry.”

Septimus frowned. “Never mind, Beetle,” he said briskly. “Tod was just going to tell us what she has discovered about the human hatching of an Orm Egg. It’s highly interesting and narrows the field tremendously.” He turned to Tod. “Please, do continue.”

Beetle’s sneezes had blown away Tod’s nerves. Her hands steady, she held the paper still and began to read in a clear voice: “The conditions

necessary for a human hatching of an Orm Egg are similar to those for the human hatching of a dragon egg, but there are important differences.

“For a human hatching of an Orm Egg to be successful it must, like that of a dragon egg, mimic the natural sequence of events. Three distinct steps are required. First there is the kick-start, which sets the hatching process in motion. Like the dragon egg, this requires fierce heat for twenty-four hours, but at an even higher temperature. Folklore tells us that a parent Orm would drop its egg into the crater of a volcano.

“The second stage is incubation. In the wild, the parent Orm would retrieve its egg and bury it in warm ash near the volcano. It would then wrap itself around the egg and using the muscles of its coils, would regularly move the egg to and fro, providing a rocking sensation. Like the young dragon, the baby Orm needs to know that a parent is present and awaits its hatching. Without movement the embryo would curdle and die.

“The third stage is hatching. Unlike a dragon egg, an Orm Egg does not need a touch of **Darke** to begin this process. It runs to a strict timetable and a much more rapid one: twelve weeks eggs-actly.” Tod noticed she had raised a few smiles and her confidence grew. “The timespan for the incubation of the Orm Egg is surprisingly short. Because a dragon egg must be incubated for a year and a day we assumed that with a Great Orm being so much larger and slower than a dragon, the incubation period would be longer. But it was just yesterday that we discovered that incubation lasts only twelve weeks.”

A few mutterings spread through the Hall at this surprising information and Tod hurried to finish what she had to say.

“The hatchling Orm will **Imprint** on the first living creature it makes eye contact with. This may be human or animal. The hatchling is almost identical to a hatchling dragon: it has wings, legs and a tail, and is very active. It can even fly. After twelve weeks in this stage it spins itself a cocoon, from which it will emerge in its adult state of a long, fragile tube with the ability to turn any rock into lapis lazuli. The larval Orm will break out of its cocoon with a sudden explosion. In ancient times, Orm cocoons were nicknamed time bombs.” Tod paused and looked down at her notes. “And, um, that’s all I have to say. Thank you very much.” To the background of some concerned murmurs in the Great Hall, Tod put the piece of paper back into her folder. She felt very relieved.

“Thank you, Tod,” Septimus said. “That was extremely interesting.” He picked up a small, battered book from the table and held it aloft to show the Moot. “My Apprentice very generously says that ‘we’ discovered this. However, it was entirely her discovery. Tod tracked down this little book in the Pyramid Library—a book that has not seen the light of day for thousands of years, I suspect.” Septimus refrained from adding the reason was because the book, *Orm Fanciers’ Factoids*, was wrongly filed in the biography section under Oom: Francis Fa, the author. (Francis Fa Oom had once, briefly, been ExtraOrdinary Wizard.)

“I need not state the obvious here,” Septimus said—although, looking at the blank early-morning faces of the assembled Wizards, he thought that he probably did, “but it is over twelve weeks since the sorcerer Oraton-Marr stole the Orm Egg. However, all is not lost. I believe that it will have taken some time for the sorcerer to journey to a place where hatching will be possible. I feel we still have a good chance of being able to find the Egg before it hatches, but we must set about this at once. We must do all we can to prevent this evil sorcerer from **Imprinting** the Orm and thus acquiring the means to create an endless source of lapis lazuli. As you all know,” Septimus said, flattering his audience (for he was none too sure they did know), “much of the **Magykal** power of the Wizard Tower stems from the fact it stands upon an enormous block of lapis, as indeed does much of the Castle. Possession of lapis lazuli enhances even a small amount of **Magyk**. Possession of an unlimited amount will render this highly capable sorcerer invincible.”

Septimus paused to emphasize his point. “It is imperative that we find the Egg *as soon as possible*.”

A rumble of concerned comments broke out and a shout came from the back of the Great Hall. “S’cuse me!”

Septimus recognized the voice of one of his older brothers, identical twins Edd and Erik, who were both Senior Apprentices. Now that Erik had cut his hair very short it was easy to tell them apart, but their voices were still identical. Septimus took a chance. “Yes, Edd?” he said, squinting into the brightness.

“It’s *Erik*.” The reply was accompanied by some amused chuckles.

“Erik. What is it?”

“Isn’t this all rather theoretical? I mean, we have no idea where in the world the Egg is, do we? And knowing how it hatches isn’t going to help us find *that* out.”

“On the contrary,” Septimus said, trying not to show his annoyance with Erik. “Knowing the conditions the Egg needs to hatch allows us to narrow down the places it is likely to be.”

“So where *is* it likely to be?” Erik shot back.

“Somewhere hot, where the Egg can be buried in sand, seems likely to me,” Septimus replied. “I can’t see Oraton-Marr risking living on the edge of a volcano. So we are looking for a desert.”

“Any particular desert?” Erik asked with the trace of a sneer.

“We have narrowed it down to the three hottest at this time of year,” Septimus said. “And we intend to explore each and every one until we find the Egg.”

“How?” Erik interrupted.

“If you’d allow me to finish, Erik, you’d find out.”

Erik leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. Septimus knew Erik was finding it hard to have his youngest brother in a position of power, but it did not excuse his rudeness.

“I propose to send my jinnee, Jim Knee, to all three deserts in quick succession to search for the Egg. As a **Magykal** being, Jim Knee will be able to travel faster than any human and will be protected from many dangers. I have given him permission to **Transform** into any creature he wishes, whenever he wishes. My Apprentice—who, as you all know, is a skilled PathFinder and understands the Ancient Ways—will show Jim Knee how to navigate them. We still have some final planning to do, but we hope to send the jinnee through today—there is not a moment to lose.”

A murmur of agreement came from the Moot. “Now,” Septimus said, “if anyone has any questions, please feel free to ask.”

As if in reply, a loud snore came from the visitors’ bench. It was followed by an outbreak of laughter from the Moot.

“I’ve got a question!” a shout came from the back of the crowd.

“Yes?”

“How do you plan to wake him up?”

“Oh, I’ll wake him up all right,” Septimus said. “Don’t you worry.”

JINNEE FUSS

Septimus and Tod retreated to the Pyramid Library to work out the best routes for Jim Knee to take. As PathFinder, Tod—accompanied by Edd and Erik Heap as bodyguards—was to show the jinnee how to navigate the first route, then she and the twins would return. After that Jim Knee was on his own. It was not until late in the afternoon that Septimus and Tod had three long lists of numbers, one list for each desert and a number for every arch that Jim Knee must walk through.

Septimus sent a message to the Manuscriptorium to say they were ready, and they met Beetle in the Great Hall. Jim Knee respected Beetle—and Septimus knew he was going to need all the respect he could get. Beetle and Septimus looked down at the sleeping jinnee, who still lay dozing on the visitors' bench beneath his quilts. “Right,” said Septimus. “Time to wake him.”

Beetle grinned. “Good luck,” he said.

“Jim Knee, wake up!” Septimus said in a commanding voice.

There was no response. The jinnee's eyes remained closed, his long, elegant hands folded peacefully over the top of the feather quilts. With the gaze of Edd and Erik upon him, Septimus was not going to let his jinnee get away with such disrespect. He took a small spiky red ball from his pocket and **Activated** it. The **Alarm** emitted a loud screech and began to jump up and down on Jim Knee's long, elegant nose. In a moment the jinnee was sitting up, an expression of outrage upon his face.

Septimus got in first. “Jim Knee, I Command you to find the Egg of the Orm.”

“What, *now*?” asked Jim Knee.

“Now,” said Septimus. “And I give you an overriding Command: keep my Apprentice safe.”

“Will do,” Jim Knee replied laconically. “And just to check. I do have free will to **Transform**?”

“Free will,” Septimus agreed. “But only in pursuit of my Commands. Understand?”

Jim Knee thought that gave him plenty of scope. “Okeydokey,” he replied.

Tod led the way. She murmured the password in the offhand manner that all Apprentices soon acquired, then the tall silver doors to the Wizard Tower slowly opened and Tod stepped out into a beautiful winter scene. A hazy sun was already low over the rooftops of Wizard Way, sending rosy sparkles of light dancing on the frosty snow that lay on the courtyard before her. The Big Freeze had been long, cold and deep that year but Tod had loved every minute of it. The snow made her feel happy and optimistic, and as she walked slowly down the white marble steps, Tod felt sure they would soon track down the Egg of the Orm.

Behind Tod came the disparate trio of Septimus, Beetle and Jim Knee. The Chief Hermetic Scribe had a firm grasp on Jim Knee’s right elbow, while Septimus had an equally firm grip on the left. Close behind them came Edd and Erik Heap in their green robes with purple Senior Apprentice ribbons on the cuffs of their sleeves. They were reassuringly broad and had a slightly wild look to them.

“I really can’t see why you don’t use our new Way in the Manuscriptorium,” Beetle was saying. “It would be so much easier than going through Marcia’s Hub. And you know what she thinks about Jim Knee.”

“For security reasons we have agreed to keep that Way closed, Beetle, *as you know*,” Septimus said. “I still wish you would let me put a **Seal** on it, just to be sure.”

Beetle had been able to use the Manuscriptorium Way only once—when he and his deputy, Foxy, had nervously ventured to the other side of the world with a stack of leaflets advertising their services—before Septimus had insisted on it being closed. It was an open secret that the Chief Hermetic Scribe felt frustrated by Septimus’s veto over what he saw as his

own jurisdiction. Beetle had even joked among his scribes about declaring independence. “We are perfectly capable of policing our Way, thank you,” Beetle said stiffly.

“Of course you are,” Septimus said, trying to mollify his friend. “But you see, Marcia’s Hub gives us much more choice. Eleven choices compared to one.”

Beetle sighed. “I know. Just thought I’d mention it, that’s all.”

At the foot of the Wizard Tower steps they turned sharp left and headed for the **Hidden** arch, which Tod—unlike Septimus or Beetle—could see fitting snugly beneath the steps like a cupboard under the stairs. Jim Knee could also see the arch, but he was not going to give anyone the satisfaction of knowing it. The jinnee knew the Ancient Ways pretty well, having once routinely traveled them as part of his job as a runner for a wealthy merchant. But Jim Knee was still annoyed at having been dragged from his winter sleep and, while he would *eventually* obey his master as he was bound to do, he did not intend to make anything easy for Septimus.

The group gathered in front of a faint line of purple chalk tracing the outline of the arch that would take them to a Hub some fifty miles away deep in the bowels of the keep of an old castle. The Hub was familiar territory to them all, for it belonged to the previous ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Septimus’s old tutor, Marcia Overstrand. Septimus was looking forward to seeing Marcia and talking his plan through with her. “Okay, Tod,” he said. “Take us in, please.”

A sudden wail came from Jim Knee. “*Aieeeee!*” With consummate drama, the jinnee slipped from their grasp like a wet fish and fell to the ground, apparently unconscious.

Septimus was not pleased. “Jim Knee, get up! At once!”

But the jinnee lay still, a streak of white upon the snow.

“I think he’s too cold,” said Beetle. “He’s only wearing a thin silk robe and open sandals.”

“Because that is all he *would* wear,” Septimus said, staring down at his jinnee in exasperation.

“Not even *underpants?*” asked Beetle.

“Don’t even go there, Beetle,” Septimus said. “I do not want to think about Jim Knee’s underpants, thank you.”

Beetle smiled ruefully. “Underpants or no, it really is very silly of him. Jinn are notoriously sensitive to temperature changes.”

Septimus had forgotten that. “Bother,” he said. “He did it deliberately. Just to make things difficult.”

“So what’s new?” Beetle grinned. “When did Jim Knee ever make things easy?”

Septimus sighed. Despite his optimism in public, privately he knew the chances of Jim Knee finding the Orm Egg were not good—and if his jinnee was set on being so contrary right from the start, things were looking very bad indeed. “We’d better take him back inside and get him warm,” Septimus said. He raised his voice in Jim Knee’s direction. “But he needn’t think he’s getting away with this kind of behavior. Any more trouble and he’ll be hibernating in the **Sealed Cell**.”

Jim Knee’s eyes flickered. The jinnee had once spent some time in the **Sealed Cell** and he had hated it. It was horribly cramped and had reminded him of the inside of his last bottle. He decided to warm up in the Wizard Tower and accept Septimus’s earlier offer of a fur coat. Then he’d get on with the job he had to do.

Septimus, Beetle, Edd and Erik lifted Jim Knee to his feet. The jinnee swayed and gave a weak groan. “He’s putting it on,” Septimus said.

“Very possibly,” Beetle agreed, “but you can’t be sure. Jinn are delicate creatures and with each new life they become more so. And if you believe half of Jim Knee’s stories, he’s had an awful lot of those.”

“I suppose,” said Septimus. He turned to Tod. “Would you mind going to warn Marcia we are coming? She’s not a big fan of Jim Knee and it might be polite to let her know. Come straight back, okay?”

“Okay.” Tod smiled. She loved traveling the Ways on her own and she loved the fact that Septimus trusted her to go alone. Septimus watched his Apprentice place her hand onto the hard white marble below the steps, then he saw the shimmering shape of an archway begin to appear and the surface of the marble soften. Septimus was impressed by his Apprentice’s skill. She was a good choice—unlike his jinnee.

SHADOWS ON THE SEAL

In Marcia's Hub three Drummins were perusing the shimmering purple skin of a **Magykal Seal**. Drummins were very short, stocky, human-like creatures accustomed to living belowground. They had been caretakers of the Hub for three years now and they knew it better than they knew the suckers on the ends of their broad, flat fingers.

Using their preferred language of signing, Fabius Drummin signed, *There's something behind the **Seal** on Way One.*

Claudius replied, *Three humans, I think.*

And a creature, added Lucius.

We should tell the boss, signed Claudius.

Claudius and Lucius both looked pointedly at Fabius, who was on upstairs duties that day. *All right, all right, I'll go,* he signed grumpily.

Fabius hurried off, his bouncing strides taking him across the white stone floor of the immaculately clean Hub and up the winding stairs that led out of it. The remaining two Drummins stared at the **Seal**, watching for any sign of failure. They were looking so intently that they did not see the arch behind them—the only one **UnSealed**—light up with a golden glow and a slight figure in a green tunic and leggings come striding out. Tod stopped. She saw the Drummins were busy and, not wanting to interrupt, she tiptoed over to them. “Hey,” she whispered.

“Argh!” The Drummins spun around. “Don't *do* that, Alice,” Lucius hissed, and using the Drummin sign for being quiet—one that everyone understood—he put his index finger to his lips.

Tod knew the Drummins were annoyed with her: they had called her Alice. “Sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean to startle you. What’s going on?”

Trouble, Lucius signed. Tod, being a PathFinder, also used signs, and although the PathFinder sign language lacked the complex grammar of the Drummins’ language, many of the signs were similar. And “trouble”—the first two fingers of each hand folded at the second joint and twisted together—was easily recognizable.

What trouble? Tod signed.

Claudius proceeded to sign something much longer, but seeing Tod’s look of incomprehension, he stopped and whispered, “There are creatures behind the **Seal**.”

Tod’s eyes widened in fear. “Not . . . *Garmin*?” *Garmin* were nightmarish beings that the sorcerer Oraton-Marr had used to abduct, terrify and control people—including, once, Tod herself. The **Seals** were placed across the arches for good reason: to stop any danger of the *Garmins*’ return.

Both Drummins shook their heads—it wasn’t *Garmin*.

Human, Claudius signed.

Tod understood the sign for “human.” Encouraged, she signed, *May I try?*

The Drummins respected Tod’s knowledge of the Ancient Ways, and now that she was Apprentice they knew she would be careful with the **Magyk** protecting the **Seals**, so they stepped aside.

Very gently, Tod placed her hands on the delicate skin of the **Seal**. Beneath the thrum of the **Magyk** warming her palms, Tod could **Feel** the energy from something alive on the other side, but her skills were untrained and she had no way of knowing whether it was even human—let alone if it was a good human or a bad one.

On the other side of the **Seal**, Sam lay slumped against the cold stone of the wall, with Marwick and Kaznim on either side. And, for a reason neither Sam nor Marwick understood, the tortoise was now resting on Sam’s wounded stomach. When Kaznim had first placed Ptolemy on Sam’s sodden bandage, Marwick had been horrified. He’d snatched the tortoise off with the words, “Don’t! It’s filthy! Have you never heard of infection?”

Kaznim didn't like Ptolemy being called filthy but she took the tortoise quickly because Marwick had looked as though he'd wanted to hurl Ptolemy to the ground, and Kaznim had a horror of the tortoise breaking his shell. But then Sam had murmured, "Put it back. Helps with . . . pain." So Marwick had reluctantly replaced the tortoise and Sam had relaxed a little.

An awkward silence fell between Kaznim and Marwick and she occupied herself with gazing at the **Seal**, thinking of ways to break through. She was just about to suggest they stick a knife into it when she saw the shadow of two hands, not much bigger than her own, appear on it. "There's someone there!" she gasped. "Look! On the **Seal**!" Marwick looked up, hope springing into his eyes. Kaznim jumped up and placed her hands against the shadows of those on the other side. Her hands fit neatly inside the shape.

"Oh!" Tod snatched her hands away and jumped back. "There's someone there. Someone *touched my hands*." She stared down at her palms as if trying to find out what they knew.

On the other side of the **Seal**, Kaznim saw the shadow of the hands disappear. "No!" she yelled. "Come back, please come back! We need help. *Help!*" She pummeled the unyielding **Seal** in desperation. Marwick sighed. It had been too good to be true, he thought. It was just a kid on the other side fooling around, nothing more.

In the Hub, Tod saw small, round shadows hitting the shimmering purple skin. "There's someone trying to get out," she whispered. "A child. Look how small the fists are. And how low down."

"It's a trick," said Lucius.

"A **Darke** trick," added Claudius.

Tod frowned. "It didn't feel **Darke**," she said. "Well, I don't think so. It felt more like a child to me. A frightened child."

"The **Darke** plays many tricks," Lucius said gloomily. "Impersonating a small human is but one."

"Particularly a frightened one," Claudius added for good measure.

Tod stared at the **Seal**. She could not shake off the feeling that someone on the other side was in desperate need of help. "I'll go upstairs and get

Marcia,” she said.

“Fabius has already—” Claudius began to explain, when the Drummin in question came thubbing down the stairs and bounced into the Hub. His gingery eyebrows were gathered into a frown.

“Boss has bloomin’ gone,” he said. Then, suddenly noticing Tod, he said, “Begging your pardon, Apprentice. What I mean to say is that unfortunately, Madam Marcia has left.”

“She never said,” Lucius growled.

“Left message with Cook. Caught ebb tide. Gone to wave the Captain off from the Seaward Quay.”

“Huh. She’s supposed to let us know first,” muttered Lucius.

“Well, time and tide wait for no woman,” said Fabius. “An’ the Captain don’t, neither. An’ moanin’ about the boss don’t get us any closer to knowin’ what be on the other side of the **Seal**.”

On the other side of the **Seal** Sam’s eyes were closing and his body was becoming limp. Marwick looked at Kaznim. “If we don’t get out soon, Sam won’t . . .” His voice trailed away.

Sam stirred and groaned. A trickle of blood ran from his sodden bandage and Kaznim watched the dark red line slowly make its way along the pure white stone. When it reached the **Seal**, to her surprise, it ran through.

Kaznim turned to tell Marwick what had happened, but he was whispering something to Sam, and suddenly she felt like an intruder on something very private. She stared studiedly at the **Seal**. Behind her a stillness had descended. As an Apothecary’s daughter, Kaznim knew what that meant. Sam’s Leaving Time was near. She sat down, cross-legged by the **Seal**, and placed her palms on it once more. “Help us,” she whispered. “Please. *Help us*.”

In the Hub, Tod and the Drummins watched a dark liquid emerge from beneath the **Seal**.

“Blood,” whispered Lucius.

“Murder,” muttered Fabius.

“Most foul,” Claudius added, shaking his head.

Tod could see the shape of two small hands once more pressed down low on the purple skin and she knew that, murder or not, someone was begging for help. “I’m going to get Septimus,” she said.

The Drummins nodded. It was time to call in reinforcements. “Travel fast,” said Fabius. “We will stand guard.”

In less than five minutes, Tod was back with Septimus. His long purple robes and his impressive gold-and-platinum belt gave him an instant air of authority. The Drummins quickly jumped away from the **Seal** and let Septimus through. Like Tod, he rested his hands on the shimmering purple skin. Like Tod, he understood that there was someone in urgent need of help on the other side, but unlike Tod, he knew for sure that there was nothing **Darke** there.

Kaznim saw the shadow of two large hands on the **Seal**, high above her head. Then, while Septimus was explaining to Tod how to **Feel** the absence of **Darke**, Kaznim, with a sudden feeling of hope, jumped up. Stretching her hands high above her head and standing on tiptoe, she just managed to place her hands against the larger shadows.

“You are right, Tod, it is a child. And others, too, in great distress,” Septimus said, taking his hands away—to Kaznim’s despair. “Now, this is a serious step: I am going to override Marcia’s **Seal**. One may only countermand another Wizard’s **Seal** when a matter of life or death is at hand. I believe this to be the case right now. You understand?”

“Yes, I do understand,” Tod said, feeling very relieved. She had wanted to break through the **Seal** ever since she had seen the small hands on the other side. Tod watched Septimus place his palms once more on the **Seal**. She saw two small shadows try to touch them and her heart did a little flip of pity—someone was desperate.

Under Septimus’s instructions, Tod ushered the Drummins away from the **Magyk** and they watched from the other side of the Hub. They saw a bright blue mist flow from the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s hands; it spread across the **Seal** and Tod felt the familiar buzz of **Magyk** in the air. She had become used to the background of **Magyk** in the Wizard Tower but now, as concentrated **Magykal** energy flowed around the Hub, setting up eddies and swirls, Tod felt her old dizziness return. She leaned back against the wall,

determined not to fall over. This was powerful **Magyk**, and Tod wanted to see it.

The purple skin across Way I was now coated with a shining blue mist that stuck so close that it looked as though the **Seal** was covered in wet paint. Tod watched Septimus stand back, bringing a thin stream of blue with him, which he took into both hands and formed into a ball. Then he muttered something and breathed onto the blue ball. At once, its color changed to bright orange. The orange flowed along the strip linking to the **Seal** and then spread rapidly over it. Tod watched, fascinated, as the tight skin of the **Seal** began to dissolve and be replaced by a soft orange mist through which she saw three figures. Two were slumped to the ground, but a small one came hurtling out, yelling, “Help us, oh, please help! He’s *dying!*”

Septimus hurried into the arch and Tod heard a sudden gasp. “Sam!” he cried. “It’s Sam! And Marwick!”

INTO THE CLIFF

Tod was dispatched to the Wizard Tower for two strong helpers and a stretcher. Her choice of helpers was, Septimus thought, exactly right. And so Sam Heap was carried home by Marwick and three of his brothers: Septimus, Edd and Erik Heap. Behind them followed Tod, holding Kaznim's free hand, while in the other Kaznim clutched her tortoise, caught in the nick of time as he fell from the stretcher.

Kaznim was startled when they emerged into a shockingly cold whiteness over which a myriad of lights and colors danced, reflecting off what she assumed was sparkling white sand. She shivered in her thin cotton coat and held Ptolemy close for comfort. Something told Kaznim that she was in a place so far away that it would take many months to travel back to her star-strewn tent. Tod saw the look of bewilderment on the young girl's face and put her arm protectively around her. She remembered the first time she had walked into the Wizard Tower courtyard, how strange it had seemed and how the onslaught of **Magyk** had been so overpowering that she had fainted.

Kaznim, despite being from the **Magykal** Draa family, was not particularly sensitive to **Magyk**, but she was glad of Tod's comforting arm as she slithered and slid on the peculiarly slippery, cold sand. As they reached the wide marble steps that led up to the entrance to the Wizard Tower, Kaznim looked in awe at the massive structure rearing above her—surely it was impossible that something so tall could remain standing. As she followed Sam's stretcher up to a pair of vast, solid silver doors, which

were now slowly opening before them, Kaznim felt as though she were walking into the face of a cliff.

An outbreak of panic mixed with excitement greeted the stretcher-bearers as they hurried into the Great Hall. Kaznim watched wide-eyed as a sea of people in blue robes surrounded the stretcher, and the young man in purple took charge. She saw a flash of silver at the far side of the Hall, and something that looked like a giant corkscrew that went up into a star-filled sky above began to spin so fast that it reminded her of a whirling sand dancer. Suddenly a flash of blue appeared through the sky and rotated rapidly downward; the next moment a tall woman with short dark hair through which ran a dramatic streak of white was jumping off and hurrying somewhat unsteadily across to the stretcher. Kaznim had an odd feeling that she recognized her, although she had no idea where from. She watched intently as the woman knelt beside the stretcher and placed two fingers on Sam's neck. Kaznim knew from her expression that the woman was expecting something very bad, but she looked up with a grim smile and said, "Faint, fluttering. He's alive."

Marwick made a strange choking noise and with renewed energy the stretcher-bearers picked up their burden and hurried Sam away to the back of the Hall. A sea of blue closed behind them and Kaznim could see no more.

Tod became aware that Kaznim was shivering violently. "Hey, you're cold," she said.

Kaznim shook her head. She was *something*, but she didn't know what.

Tod thought she knew. "You must be tired and hungry," she said.

Kaznim nodded even though she felt neither. All she felt was lost.

"I'll take you up to the Apprentices' common room," Tod said. "You can have some supper and I will find you a bed." Kaznim bit her lip. She didn't want to sleep in this strange place, so full of people, so heavy with stone, so bright with light. All she wanted was her own bed in the tranquility of a starry tent with the soft breathing of her mother asleep in the darkness. Not trusting herself to speak, Kaznim allowed Tod to lead her onto the strange moving corkscrew.

Kaznim had seen stairs, but never any that *moved*. Numbly, she followed Tod's example. She stepped onto the silver platform and watched

the ground drop slowly away. “They’re weird, aren’t they?” Tod said. “I remember the first time I went on them it was really scary.”

Kaznim nodded uncertainly as the world spun around. As they rose up through the height of the Great Hall, toward the star-studded sky, she began to feel sick. And then, to her surprise, they passed through a hole in the sky and emerged into another, much simpler, smaller space with a floor all of its own.

“We need to get off soon,” Tod said. “I’ll go first and then you grab my hands and jump. Okay?” Before Kaznim could say anything, Tod had stepped up onto the floor and was standing, arms outstretched, smiling with encouragement.

Kaznim froze.

“Come on,” Tod said. “It’s really easy. Just step off.”

Kaznim shook her head. Her world was spinning out of control and she didn’t know what to do. She clung to the center post with one hand, held on tight to Ptolemy with the other and screwed her eyes shut.

Tod watched Kaznim rotate on upward. She leaped back onto the stairs and broke Wizard Tower Apprentice Rule Number Fifty-Two: *Apprentices must not move between steps on the spiral stairs*. Tod didn’t like to break the rules, but she reckoned that helping a scared girl and her tortoise was more important. Feeling very daring, she climbed the moving stairs and soon caught up with Kaznim.

Tod spent the next three floors trying to persuade Kaznim to open her eyes, but to no effect. As the stairs turned slowly on, ever upward, Tod realized they were now approaching floor seven, where the Sick Bay was located. Deciding to make the best of it, she said, “Do you want to see how Sam is?”

“He’s dying,” Kaznim whispered.

“He’s not dead yet,” Tod said briskly. “Come on, Sam needs all the help he can get. This floor is the Sick Bay. Let’s get off and see if there is anything we can do.”

The only thing Kaznim wanted to do more than get off the horrible corkscrew was to help Sam. She let go of the center pole, opened her eyes and wished she hadn’t. The world was still spinning. She saw the floor traveling down to meet them and closed her eyes to stop herself from

falling. The next thing she knew, Tod had grabbed her and lifted her onto something that, to her relief, *didn't move*.

Warily, Kaznim opened her eyes. The Sick Bay corridor was dimly lit and she couldn't see much. Clutching Ptolemy tightly to her, Kaznim allowed herself to be guided to some double doors at the end of the corridor, above which was a sign proclaiming in glowing red letters: *No admittance. Press green button and wait.*

Tod had never seen that sign lit before. She thought it did not bode well, but said nothing to Kaznim. She pressed the large button beside the doors and waited. After a very long minute, the doors opened a few inches and Edd peered out. "Tod—good timing!" he said.

"Oh?" Tod asked anxiously.

"Septimus wants you to fetch Marcellus Pye. As quick as you can."

Tod knew that was not good news. Marcellus Pye was the Castle Alchemist but he also had a talent for surgery, which was something that Dr. Draa thought was barbarous. Things must be bad for Dandra to agree to have Marcellus in the Sick Bay. "I'll get him right away," Tod said.

"Thanks." Edd began to close the doors and then remembered something. "And Septimus says, when you've done that, can you tell the rest of our brothers? That's Simon—you know, the Deputy Alchemist? And also Nicko, who'll be down at the boatyard, and Jo-Jo, who'll be . . . well, somewhere. Ask at Gothyk Grotto, they'll know. Is that okay?"

Tod was a little overwhelmed by the idea of rounding up the Heap brothers, but she was determined not to show it. "Yep. Okay," she said, and turned to go. Quickly, before the doors closed, Kaznim pushed Ptolemy into Edd's hands. Edd Heap looked down at the creature as though Kaznim had given him a bomb. He had never seen a tortoise before.

"For Sam," Kaznim said. "He's an Apothecary tortoise."

Edd shook his head. "They don't allow animals in there."

"Tell them what he is," said Kaznim. "Then they will."

The tall woman with the white streak in her hair appeared at the door behind Edd. "Alice," Dandra said briskly. "We need Marcellus fast, please."

"Yes. Sorry. Just going," said Tod.

"Be quick," Dandra said and then, "Edd, what are you holding?"

Edd looked bewildered. "A Pothecary tortoise?"

Dandra looked amazed. “*Ptolemy!*” She gasped. “Give him to me!” She snatched the tortoise and hurried back into the Sick Bay. Edd stared down at his empty hands, shook his head, then turned and followed. The doors swung closed behind them.

“How did she know my tortoise’s name?” asked Kaznim, staring at the closed doors.

“I have no idea.” Tod was as bewildered as Kaznim. “Look, I’ve got to go. Wait here. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Kaznim watched Tod hurry to the silver stairs and press a large red button on the wall. A distant siren sounded a stair priority warning. Tod jumped on, the stairs sped up and in a sudden whirl of green, she was gone. Kaznim was left in the hushed dimness of the Sick Bay corridor, with its astringent smells that reminded her of a star-strewn tent so far away. She sat down on the waiting bench and a wave of homesickness washed over her.

APOTHECARY TORTOISE

Inside the Sick Bay Dandra Draa and her old tortoise were becoming reacquainted. She held him up so that they were eye to eye and Ptolemy stuck his head out as far as he could. If he could have smiled he would have; it was good to see his old attendant again. He had wondered what had happened to her. Much as the tortoise felt great affection for his young attendant, he had, like all tortoises, a preference for maturer creatures.

Dandra felt as though her past had caught up with her and run her over. Her hands were shaking as she fought back a familiar feeling of fear. “Who brought this tortoise here?” she asked.

“Tod,” said Edd.

“*Alice* brought it?”

“Er, well, there was a girl with her. Quite young. I think it belonged to her.”

Dandra shook her head, puzzled. “I . . . I don’t understand,” she muttered.

Edd nodded in agreement. He didn’t understand either—Dandra never allowed animals in the Sick Bay, and here she was waving around a dirty rock with scaly legs and a cranky look in its eyes. *It will be peeing on the floor next*, Edd thought. “I’ll get a cloth, shall I?” he offered. “Something for it to sit on.”

Dandra looked impressed. “Yes, please, Edd. That’s what we always do—but how did you know?”

Edd, who enjoyed helping in the Sick Bay, hurried away, pleased to be of use.

Sam Heap was in the Quiet Room, a small and peaceful space off the main Sick Bay. It was used for Wizards who were very ill or nearing the end of their lives, and after a nasty flu epidemic earlier that winter it was now home to six ghosts, all spending their obligatory ghostly Leaving Time—a year and a day after their death—in the place where they had entered ghosthood.

The ghostly old Wizards regarded Sam Heap mournfully. They all remembered him as a bright, noisy little boy, full of life. It seemed impossible that this thin and deathly still young man who was as white as the sheets beneath him—apart from the great gash of red across his stomach—was the same person.

“I’m surprised his parents aren’t here,” whispered one. “You know how obsessed Sarah Heap is with her boys.”

“I heard that Sarah and Silas are away in the Forest,” whispered another. “They went to stay with Galen for the MidWinter Feast.”

“Whatever did they want to do that for?” came the reply.

“Silas didn’t want to,” said the first. “He was in here complaining the day before they went. But of course, you weren’t here then. You were still . . .” The ghost trailed off, embarrassed.

“Alive,” the other ghost finished for him, sourly.

There was an awkward silence—it was bad manners among ghosts to talk about Life and Death. “Well,” said another, “even if Sarah and Silas are in the Forest, someone should go and tell them. It doesn’t seem right not to know your boy’s dying, does it?”

The ghosts nodded and sighed, sending a chill breeze ruffling the sheets. It was tough being stuck in the Quiet Room of the Sick Bay for one’s Leaving Time. It was a small, gloomy place and it was crowded enough without having another ghost join them—especially a young one who had not expected to Leave his Life just yet. Those ghosts were always noisy and disruptive. And so—just like the Living who hurried in and out of the Quiet Room—the resident ghosts wished heartily that Sam Heap would recover.

But no one wished Sam to live more than Marwick. He sat beside the high, narrow bed, clutching Sam’s cold hand. It seemed to Marwick that Sam was getting ready to Leave. His skin was sweaty, his breath came in rapid, shallow gasps and around his waist his fresh bandage was already showing a dark red stain of blood.

Dr. Dandra Draa came in carrying Ptolemy on a starched white line square and very gently laid him on top of Sam's bandage.

The attendant ghosts looked at one another in disbelief. "She's gone mad," hissed one.

"Totally bonkers," agreed the others.

At the comforting presence of the tortoise, Sam's eyelids flickered and Marwick thought his breathing eased a little. And maybe his hand felt a little warmer. Maybe . . .

Ptolemy pulled in his legs and head and concentrated on what was beneath his shell. It did not feel good—the tissues felt damaged and disturbed and there was metal there, sharp and bright. This was not a job for a tortoise, Ptolemy reflected. This was a job for a surgeon: something inside Sam needed to be taken out.

Dandra knew that too. She knelt down so that she was at eye level with her old tortoise. "Ptolemy. Show me, I pray, where the sharpness lies," she said.

Careful not to cause Sam any extra pain, Ptolemy put his legs out, raised himself up and moved around in a half circle. Then, three times, very slowly, he dipped his head down and touched his nose to the sharp bright spot beneath the bandages.

Dandra looked at Marwick. "It is as I feared," she said. "There is something in the wound. But at least now we know where it is. And Marcellus Pye will be here soon to take it out."

"I knew it," Marwick mumbled. "I *knew* the blade had broken off." Marwick saw Sam's lifeblood oozing through the bandages and he knew that Marcellus Pye could not get there a moment too soon.





PART IV

FIFTY-SIX HOURS TO HATCHING

THE EGG BOX

Forgotten in the crisis, Kaznim sat alone on the hard wooden bench outside the Sick Bay. She watched a succession of people rush by: four Wizards staggering with a small, but clearly very heavy, ancient wooden chest, followed at intervals by three young men who all looked a little like Sam Heap. One wore black, one looked like a sailor, in navy blue jerkin and trews, and the last wore long green robes and looked to Kaznim just like the one to whom she had given her precious tortoise, except he had very short hair. People carrying piles of towels and large colored bottles came and went. Silently Kaznim watched them all pass by with no more than a brief glance and perhaps a distant smile.

Suddenly a young woman wearing the most beautiful red silk robes and a simple crown, her eyes blurry with tears, hurried by. Kaznim stared in amazement. Enough Queens and Princesses had visited the star tent for her to recognize the real thing when she saw it. Like everyone else, the Queen raced by without noticing her and hurtled through the Sick Bay doors. But unlike the others, when the Queen came out she saw Kaznim and stopped. Kaznim smiled nervously. The Queen looked like a much younger version of a particularly unpleasant Queen who controlled the city nearest to her star tent. She even wore red, just like the Red Queen herself. But Kaznim could tell she was different; her eyes were friendly, not blank and cruel as her mother had once described those of the Red Queen—and besides, she was smiling, although a little sadly. It was said that the Red Queen never smiled except when she was about to cut someone's head off. And Kaznim was pretty sure this Queen wasn't planning on doing that. She didn't have a sword with her, anyway.

To Kaznim's utter amazement, the young Queen came over and knelt beside her. "Are you the little girl who came with Sam?" she asked.

Kaznim was speechless. She nodded and the Queen put her hand on hers. It was the first kind touch Kaznim had felt since Tod had disappeared, and tears sprung into her eyes. “Thank you,” the Queen said. “I know it was because of you that they decided to open the **Seal**.”

Kaznim’s eyes grew wide. “Because of *me*?”

“They saw your hands through the **Magyk**.”

Kaznim was in awe of the Queen, who was so beautiful with her long dark hair and violet-colored eyes. At last she managed to stutter, “Is Sam . . . Is he all right?”

“Sam’s not in pain,” the Queen told her. “Thanks to your tortoise, I think. But he is very weak. There is part of a knife still inside him. We are waiting for Marcellus Pye. He is a surgeon. He will be able to take it out.”

“And then Sam will be better?” asked Kaznim.

The Queen blinked away tears. “I hope so. I really, *really* hope so.” She stood up quickly and brushed her hand across her face. “I must go,” she said. “I’m going to find Mum and Dad. I *have* to tell them.”

Kaznim nodded. So this must be a Princess, not a Queen, she thought. She was impressed that the King and Queen would want to know about Sam Heap. Most Kings and Queens didn’t care at all if one of their subjects was ill. “It is nice of the King and Queen to care so much,” she ventured shyly.

The “Princess” looked puzzled and then she smiled. “Oh, there isn’t a King here,” she said. “There’s just me. I’m the Queen. I meant *Sam’s* Mum and Dad, who are mine, too.” The Queen reached down and held Kaznim’s hand once more. “Thank you for helping Sam,” she said, then she turned, ran to the stairs and jumped on. Amazed, Kaznim watched the light sparkle off the Queen’s golden crown as the stairs took her slowly down.

Kaznim spent the next ten minutes occupied with wondering if Sam Heap was a prince. Surely he must be, if he shared his parents with the Queen. But if that was so, why wasn’t Sam the King? In Kaznim’s country a girl only got to be Queen if she had no brothers. It didn’t make any sense at all. But then not much in this strange place did.

The Sick Bay corridor fell quiet and Kaznim sat in the shadows, bored and lonely. It was then she remembered, somewhat guiltily now, the gold box that she had stolen from Subhan-Subhan. Glad of something to do, she

took the box from her pocket and ran her fingers over the ancient gold streaked with blue, the battered edges and dark metal hinges. Then she pulled open the clasp and looked inside. Nestling in a shaped bed of red velvet was the most exquisitely tiny hourglass that Kaznim had ever seen. Very carefully she lifted it from its bed and held it up. She had seen hourglasses before, full of sand, which ran through at a steady pace. But this one was different. Made of gold and lapis, it contained little silver grains that shone even in the dim lights of the corridor. It was exquisite. Entranced, Kaznim stared at it. There were many more grains of silver in one half than in the other, so she turned the hourglass so that most of them were in the top half and she could see them cascade down. To her surprise, they did not move. She turned it around, around, and then around again, yet not one of the grains dropped through. Kaznim was giving it one last go when, to her amazement, a grain of silver floated *up* from the bottom of the hourglass and buried itself in the mass of grains in the top. Kaznim nearly dropped it in shock. *It was **Magyk**.*

Kaznim stared at the hourglass. This must be what the Egg Boy called his **Egg Timer**—the one he'd boasted that the sorcerer had given him. Kaznim remembered now that the Egg Boy had said that a grain went through once every three hours. She looked at the small huddle of grains left. If only she could count them, she would know how long it would be until her little sister, Bubba, was safe. The hourglass was a frightening reminder of the power that the sorcerer Oraton-Marr had over her family. Someone rushed past into the Sick Bay and Kaznim quickly shoved the **Egg Timer** into her pocket.

Kaznim pushed away thoughts of her mother and sister. She blinked back tears and returned to studying the box. In two neat piles on either side of the empty hourglass bed were thick cards of different colors and shades. She took the cards out and saw a sprinkling of sand lying at the bottom of the box. Kaznim ran her finger across the sand, and felt even more homesick. She played with it for a while, letting it slide back and forth across the polished silver inside the box, then, afraid of losing the precious sand, she put the lid on the box and began to look at the cards.

There were twelve cards, ranging from a deep purple to bright, fiery red. Kaznim laid the cards out on the bench beside her and, beginning with the

darkest purple card, she fanned them out and smiled—she had found a rainbow inside a pot of gold.

Kaznim looked at the cards more closely. On each one was a diagram of a cut-through egg with a small creature curled up inside it. She noticed that in each image the creature grew a little, beginning as a tiny shrimp and finishing as a perfect little dragon. Kaznim was so engrossed in the pictures that she did not notice the ExtraOrdinary Wizard emerge from the Sick Bay. The first she knew of him was when his shadow fell across the cards, like that of a sand eagle falling over a small desert creature. Hastily, she gathered the cards together.

“Ah,” the ExtraOrdinary Wizard said. “Still here?”

Kaznim nodded. She wondered where else he thought she might go. She noticed that his gaze was fixed on the pile of cards.

“Nice pictures,” he said. “What are they?”

Kaznim thought fast. “They’re a card game. You . . . you play it on your own.” She looked up to see if he believed her. It was hard to tell. His green eyes looked cloudy and he had a deep frown between them.

“I’m glad you have something to pass the time,” he said. “It must be boring for you, stuck here.”

Kaznim nodded. She felt bad about lying. But the pictures on the cards belonged to home, to her desert and the hot sands. Kaznim found she even felt proprietorial about the horrible Egg Boy and the Egg. It was *her* world and it wasn’t any business of the strangers in this noisy, heavy stone tower. Defiantly—for she could tell that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard wanted to look at the cards more closely—she put the cards back into the box and closed the lid with a *snap*.

The sudden wail of the emergency siren from the stairs stopped the ExtraOrdinary Wizard from asking anything more. The stairs sped up and he hurried over to wait beside them. Kaznim shoved the gold box deep into her tunic pocket.

“Marcellus!” she heard the ExtraOrdinary Wizard say. “Hurry. There’s not a moment to lose.”

Kaznim saw a youngish man in black and gold with his hair styled in a strange bowl cut stumble awkwardly off the stairs. He was carrying a small leather case that reminded Kaznim of her mother’s Apothecary bag. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard grabbed his arm and hurried him along the corridor

into the Sick Bay. The doors swung closed and once again all was quiet. Kaznim looked back at the stairs, expecting Tod to arrive, but there was no sign of her. There was nothing she could do but sit and wait. Which is what she did. Occasionally someone hurried into the Sick Bay but no one thought to come out and tell her how Sam was. Or to ask how she was.

Time ticked slowly by and Kaznim sat in the empty corridor, biting back tears. She felt utterly deserted.

JO-JO

Tod had been delayed by searching for the last of Sam's brothers. She had eventually found Jo-Jo Heap moping alone in the rooms of his on-off girlfriend—a young witch named Marissa of whom not one of his family approved. When she finally hurried Jo-Jo along the Sick Bay corridor, Kaznim was lying curled up on the bench, asleep. A pang of guilt stabbed Tod as she and Jo-Jo slipped into the Sick Bay.

Marcellus Pye was sitting at the table packing a variety of small shiny instruments into his bag. He was surrounded by all the Heap brothers—except for Jo-Jo and Sam himself. Next to Marcellus sat Septimus, his purple robes splattered with dark stains of blood. Beside Septimus, Edd was busy writing up some notes for Dandra, then there was Nicko Heap, his sunburned face and brightly braided hair looking out of place in the sparse whiteness of the Sick Bay. Erik was talking in a low voice to the oldest Heap brother, Simon, who wore a similar black tunic to Marcellus although less encrusted with gold and, Tod noticed, less encrusted with blood, too.

When Jo-Jo came in they all looked up at the same time and Tod had the odd sensation of five identical pairs of eyes acting as one.

“You took your time,” Erik growled.

Jo-Jo looked flustered. He was still embarrassed to have been found tearfully waiting in Marissa's rooms. At the sound of Tod's footsteps on the stairs, Jo-Jo had thrown the door open and said, “Oh, Marissa, please—” and had then realized who it was. He had tried to close the door on Tod, and it was only when she had told him about Sam that Jo-Jo relented and agreed to come.

“Where’s Sam?” Jo-Jo asked, trying to make up for his lateness. “Can I see him?”

“I’ll take you through,” said Septimus.

Tod and Jo-Jo followed Septimus into the Quiet Room. Sam was sleeping peacefully on his high, narrow bed, with, to Jo-Jo’s surprise, a tortoise resting on a clean white bandage wrapped tightly around his stomach. Marwick was dozing in a chair beside him and on the other side of the bed sat Dandra, watching her patient, her fingers resting lightly on his wrist.

Dandra looked up and smiled wearily. “He’s very weak,” she said. “He’s lost so much blood. But they got the blade out.” She pointed to an oblong metal dish resting on a table beneath a small, high window.

Septimus picked up the dish and showed it to Jo-Jo and Tod. “Vicious thing,” he said. A long, thin sliver of steel lay at the bottom of the dish, bright and sharp in a sudden shaft of moonlight. The ghostly inhabitants of the Quiet Room glanced at one another. Some of them were almost transparent, shocked by what they had recently witnessed.

Jo-Jo, too, was shocked. “Cool,” he said, trying to hide his dismay at how ill his brother looked. “Yeah. Totally cool.”

There was a strained silence and then Dandra said, “Alice, you look exhausted. Time for bed.”

SNEAK PEEK

Tod wandered out through the stillness of the nighttime Sick Bay, past the subdued group of Heaps who had settled down for the night vigil, and slipped silently into the dimly lit corridor. She was so tired that she would have walked straight past Kaznim without a thought, had a small snuffle not alerted her to the presence of a curled-up form sleeping on the waiting bench.

Bother, thought Tod. The last thing she wanted was to have to wake Kaznim, get her back down the stairs and then find somewhere for her to sleep—which was not going to be easy, as the dorm was full. Sternly, Tod told herself not to be so mean. Kaznim was lost and alone in a strange place and she knew only too well how that felt.

Tod went over to Kaznim and shook her gently. “Kaznim. Kaznim . . . wake up.” The girl stirred and her arm knocked something to the floor. It landed with a clatter and Tod knelt down to pick it up. It was a gold box. The lid had come off and some multicolored cards had spilled out. Tod gathered the cards together and as she touched each one a faint buzz of alien **Magyk** fluttered through her fingers. Tod was surprised—she hadn’t thought that Kaznim had anything **Magykal** about her.

In the dimness of the corridor’s nightlights, Tod could not see if she had found all the cards. Not wanting to lose any of what was obviously Kaznim’s treasured possession, she took a small **FlashLight** from her Apprentice belt—a thin green cylinder with a black spot at one end and a white spot at the other. Tod pressed the white spot and a beam of darkness shone from the black. Blearily, she pressed the black spot and a needle-

sharp beam of light came shining out from the white. She scanned the floor beneath the bench looking for any stray cards and found a surprising amount of grit and two cards: a bright red and a pale blue. On the red card the **FlashLight** showed the diagram of a tiny dragon curled within an oval.

Intrigued, Tod sat down on the bench beside Kaznim—who was still deeply asleep—and looked at the cards. At first glance the drawing on each card looked very similar. They both had the outline of the oval within which a little creature lay. But the pale blue card showed a more simple shape, whereas the red one showed a perfectly formed tiny dragon. Tod gazed at them both for some seconds, and then with a jolt, she realized what she was looking at. It was a cut-through of an egg, and the blue card showed the dragon at an earlier stage of development. *Or was it*, Tod suddenly thought with a stab of excitement, *an Orm?*

With all traces of sleepiness now gone, Tod took the rest of the cards from the box and spread them out on the bench. She glanced guiltily at Kaznim. Something told her that Kaznim would not approve of this. In the beam of her **FlashLight**, Tod began to examine the cards, which were numbered from one to twelve. As she concentrated on putting them in order, the **FlashLight** beam strayed onto Kaznim's face. The girl's eyelids fluttered and suddenly she was awake. Kaznim sat up with a start.

"It's all right, Kaznim," Tod murmured, hurriedly shoving the cards back into the box.

Kaznim stared at Tod, for a moment wondering where she was—and then she remembered. She looked down and saw her box in Tod's hands. "That's mine," she said. "Give it back."

"Here you are," Tod said. "It fell on the floor."

Kaznim looked at Tod suspiciously, then she checked the box. Something was missing. "My sand!" she cried out, jumping down from the bench. "You've lost my sand!"

Tod realized what the grit actually was. "It fell out," she said. "There's nothing we can do about it now."

"Yes there is! We can sweep it up!" Kaznim was distraught. "It's my sand. From home. *My sand . . .*" With that she burst into tears.

Tod kneeled down and shone her **FlashLight** beam onto the floor. She was still learning **Basyk Magyk**, and one of the simple spells she had read—although not yet practiced—was a **Collecting** spell for small particles.

Tod decided to try it. Anything was better than scraping sand off the floor at half past one in the morning with a grumpy little girl eyeballing her.

The excitement of trying some **Magyk** for a real purpose drove the sleep from Tod's fuzzy head. From her Apprentice belt, she took a small piece of ancient **Magyk** paper. She laid it on the floor and placed a grain of Kaznim's precious sand on the middle of it. Then, muttering, "*Like to like together spin, like to like gather in,*" Tod made a circling sign above the paper with her right index finger. There was a small blue flash and the grains of sand began to whizz around in circles. In the beam of her **FlashLight**, Tod saw them heading toward the paper. "Like tiny ants," she murmured, smiling at her success.

Suddenly the sand stopped its orderly procession toward the paper. The grains began to run around the floor as though they had grown legs. Tod stared at them in dismay. What had gone wrong? And then she realized. She had forgotten that simple spells stay open until their task is done. The spell was now making the sand behave like tiny ants. Relieved that she had not likened the sand to spiders—Tod had a fear of spiders—she muttered, "*like sand,*" and the procession resumed.

Triumphantly, Tod tipped the sand into Kaznim's gold box. She got no thanks at all. Kaznim snatched the box and looked at Tod with a new suspicion in her eyes. "Where's Ptolemy?" she asked.

"Who?" Tod asked, puzzled.

"My *tortoise*. Where is he? Is he still with Sam? Is Sam all right?"

Tod was relieved that they were on safer ground. "Sam is still very weak. But they took out a piece of a knife blade. Your tortoise is still with him. Dr. Draa says Ptolemy will help Sam get a good night's sleep."

Kaznim frowned. "That's *my* name," she said.

"What is?" asked Tod. The **Magyk** had left her and she felt stupid with tiredness.

"Draa. I am Kaznim Na-Draa."

"What a coincidence. Well, tomorrow when you come and see Sam you will meet Dandra."

"Dandra?" Kaznim looked shocked. "*Dandra Draa?*" Dandra Draa was a name Kaznim had heard throughout her childhood. And whenever it was said, it was accompanied by a downward stab of the left thumb—the sign of the Eternal Curse.

“Yes, Dr. Dandra Draa. She’s our physician here. She runs the Sick Bay. She is really nice.”

“Dandra Draa is *not* nice,” Kaznim said very determinedly.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll like her when you meet her,” said Tod, thinking what a strange person Kaznim was turning out to be.

“No, I won’t,” Kaznim told her. She balled her left hand into a fist, pushed her thumb out and jabbed her fist toward the floor in a movement that was full of hate. Tod stared at Kaznim, shocked. Defiantly, Kaznim returned the stare. And then, spitting out the words one by one, she said, “Dandra Draa killed my father.”

CARDS ON THE TABLE

A year ago the Junior Girls' Apprentice Dorm had had a makeover. Each bed now resided within its own private, tented space. Such was the dorm's popularity since the arrival of the tents that Apprentices who would have normally lived at home now queued up for a chance to "live in the Wizzer," as they called the Wizard Tower. It was rare for the dorm to have a spare bed, and that night as usual there were none. Tod was so tired that she could not think where else Kaznim could sleep, so she gave up her own bed. Kaznim seemed exhausted by her outburst against Dandra and as soon as she lay down she fell into a deep sleep. Warily, Tod went to fetch some cushions and a spare quilt—there was enough space in the tent for her to sleep on the floor.

But Tod could not sleep. Her brain refused to switch off and thoughts whirled around her head like a merry-go-round. She lay staring up at the blue and green stripes of the silk that rose up above her, thinking about the cards in Kaznim's box, and about the sand from Kaznim's home. The more she thought, the more she was certain that Kaznim knew all about the Egg of the Orm. Maybe, Tod thought excitedly, she had even seen it.

Tod made a decision—she must show the cards to Septimus. *Right now.* And if she was going to have to be a low-down sneaky pickpocket to get them, then that was what she would be. Stealthily, Tod pulled back Kaznim's quilt and drew the gold box out of the sleeping girl's pocket. Careful not to spill any of the wretched sand, Tod removed the cards, replaced the box and gently covered Kaznim up again. Then she tiptoed out

of the tent into the quiet of the dorm and made her way up to the seventh floor.

Tod burst into the Sick Bay. “Look!” she said. “Look what I found!”

Six Heaps sitting around the central desk looked up in surprise.

“Tod,” Septimus said wearily, “it is two o’clock in the morning. You should be asleep.”

Tod faltered for a moment. She felt like a child who was being told off for not going to bed. But she remembered what her father used to say to her: “*If you think something is important, Tod, then it is.*” And so Tod pushed the cards into Septimus’s hands. “Can you **Feel** something?” she asked.

Septimus held the cards and was still for a moment. “Yes,” he said. “It’s faint. But I can **Feel** . . . echoes of **Magyk**. But not our **Magyk**.”

Tod was excited that Septimus could **Feel** it too. Her confidence grew. “So now spread the cards out so that they run one to twelve, picture side up,” she told him.

Septimus was amused that his new Apprentice had suddenly turned teacher. Obediently, he did as he was told so that a rainbow of cards ran across the desk.

“Cool card game,” said Jo-Jo. “We should get some like that for the Grot.” “The Grot” was the slang name for Gothyk Grotto, the shop where Jo-Jo worked.

“They’re not pretend,” Tod said scathingly. “They’re for real.” But Jo-Jo had sowed a seed of doubt and Tod began to be afraid that these might indeed be some kind of game.

“They belong to the little girl who came with Sam and Marwick,” Septimus said. “I saw her playing with them. She did actually tell me they were a card game.”

“Oh,” said Tod. She suddenly felt very foolish. If Septimus too thought they were a game, she had made a really stupid mistake.

Septimus looked up and smiled at Tod. “I didn’t believe her. I could see they were more than that. But we had other things to think about right then. Well done, Tod. I was wondering how to get a closer look without upsetting her.” He examined the cards one by one, peering closely at each diagram detailing a growing embryo unfolding like a bud.

Nicko, the seafaring brother, spoke. “They’re like gulls’ eggs,” he said. “I’ve seen the chick at all these stages.” He pulled a face. “They taste revolting. You’d be surprised how crunchy the little bones are once it begins to look like a bird. And the tiny feathers get stuck between your teeth. Then, when you try to pull them out they break off and—” He stopped. “*What?*” he demanded. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

“Yuck,” said Jo-Jo. “That is authentic *yuck*.”

“The stuff you guys eat at sea is unbelievable,” said Erik.

Nicko shrugged. “You’ll try anything when you’re starving on a rock,” he said.

Septimus looked up at Tod. “This *has* to be the development of the Orm inside the Egg. Twelve cards, one for each week.”

“And there was sand in the box too,” Tod said excitedly. “She said it was from her home.”

“Well, well, did she now?” Septimus murmured. “Sand from a desert . . . It all fits.” He shook his head. “But *why* has the little girl got them—what is her name again?”

“Kaznim Na-Draa,” Tod said.

“Draa,” said Septimus. “Strange coincidence. Why she has these with her is a mystery. We will ask her tomorrow.”

“I don’t think she’ll tell us,” Tod said. She explained what had happened outside the Sick Bay when the box fell on the floor, leaving out the tirade against Dandra. Recently there had been a campaign in the Wizard Tower against gossip. The catchphrase had been: *Mud sticks—so don’t throw it*. Tod didn’t want to throw any mud against Dandra, someone she admired and liked very much.

Septimus was thinking. “Draa . . . Draa,” he was murmuring. “It all fits. You know that Dandra lived in a desert before she came to us?” He got up and walked over to the Quiet Room. “Dandra, can you leave your patient for a few minutes?”

Dandra woke Marwick so that he could watch Sam and tiptoed out of the Quiet Room. “Alice!” she said very disapprovingly. “What are you doing here? Go back to bed at once.”

“It’s all right, Dandra,” Septimus said. “Tod has brought us something rather important. And it won’t wait. What do you make of this?” He showed Dandra the rainbow of cards.

“It is the embryonic development of a reptile,” Dandra said. “In the later stages it looks like a dragon, but the early stages are significantly different.”

“We think it is an Orm,” Septimus said.

“Really?” Dandra put on a pair of small spectacles and looked closely at the cards.

“There’s stuff on the other side, too,” Tod pointed out. “Like a timetable. Look.” She turned the cards over and spread them across the desk. The back of each card was divided into seven spaces and each space was split into eight. “It’s like seven days of the week,” Tod said. “And each day is split into three-hour slots.”

“Like Watches on a boat,” said Nicko.

“True,” Septimus agreed. “Some task that has to be done at regular intervals, maybe?”

“Turning the Egg!” Tod said excitedly. “To keep it moving as though it were in its parent’s coils—like it said in the book.”

Septimus nodded. “Yes . . . yes, that would fit very well.”

Tod felt thrilled to be taking an equal part in such an important discussion, and to be listened to because what she was saying actually mattered. She watched Septimus peer at the cards, frowning. She guessed what he was going to say.

“If that is the case,” Septimus said, “then the task is very nearly complete. Look.” Closer examination showed that the first eleven cards had all their boxes ticked. Card twelve—the bright red—had the first three days ticked and the first two boxes for the fourth day. The rest were blank.

Septimus picked up the red card and turned it over. It showed a tiny winged dragonlike creature curled into a ball. Its head was big, its eyes closed and its legs folded beneath its belly, with its tail wrapped around its body. On top of its nose was a pointed spike. “I am very concerned,” Septimus said, “that this is the stage of development that the Egg of the Orm has reached. Which means that we have only . . . sheesh . . . *three days* to find it before it hatches.”

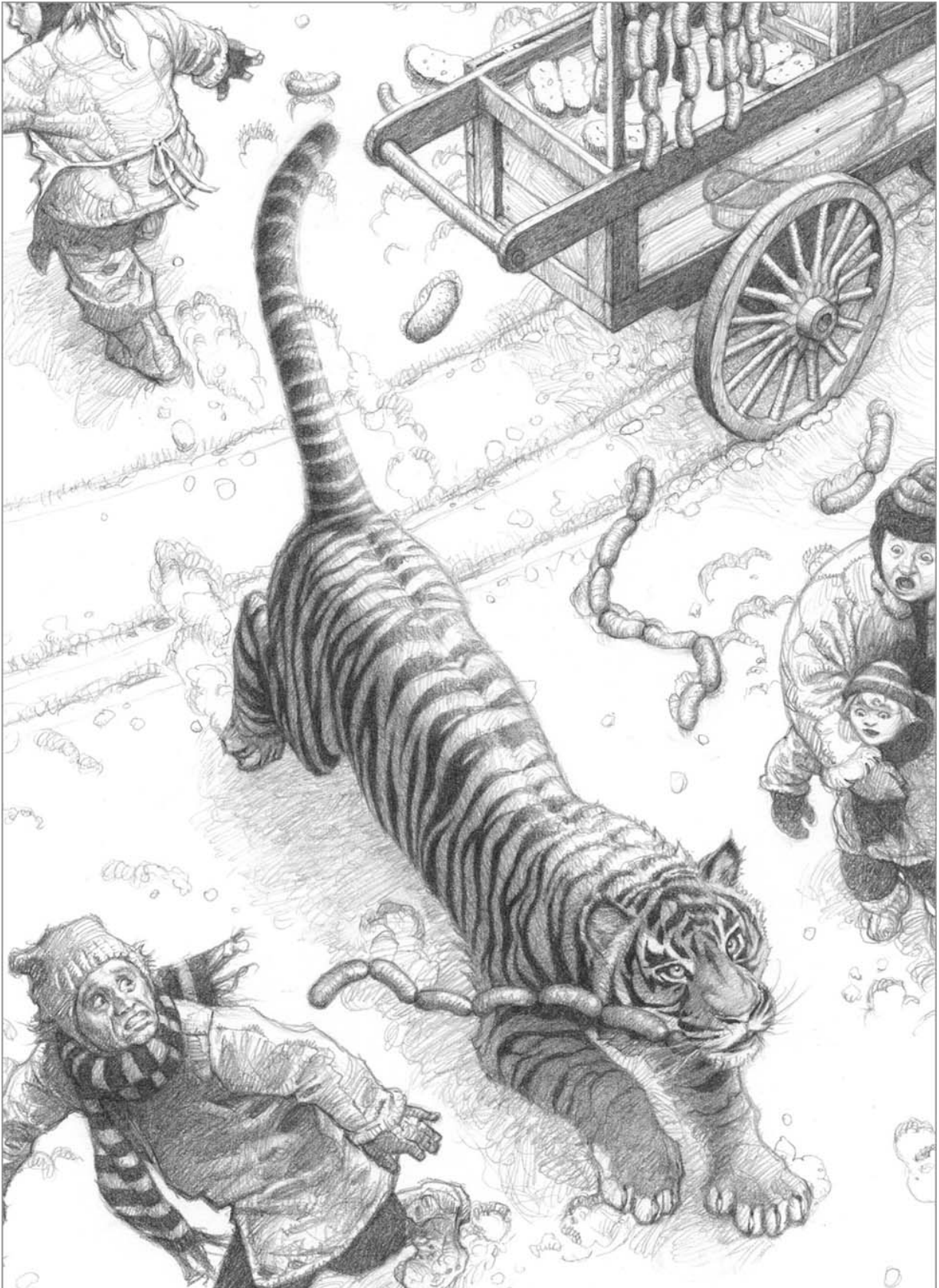
Everyone stared down at the cards. No one spoke. And then Jo-Jo said, “Cool. A baby Orm. That is so *totally* cool.”

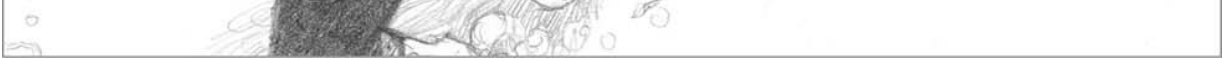
“Shut *up*, Jo-Jo,” chorused his brothers.

“Dillop,” added Nicko.

“But it *is* cool,” Jo-Jo protested. “Just think if we had one here. How amazing would that be?”

“Jo-Jo,” Septimus said. “You are, as Nicko pointed out, a dillop. But actually, you have just said something rather interesting.”





PART V

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS TO HATCHING

A DISSATISFIED VISITOR

The next morning *Tod* woke unusually early. It took her a few moments to remember why she was sleeping on the floor of her tent and some moments more to realize that the very reason for her being on the floor had disappeared: her bed was empty and Kaznim was gone. *Tod* leaped up in dismay, unable to believe her eyes.

The night before, as she left the Sick Bay, Septimus had said that her quick thinking had very likely saved them all from a highly dangerous situation. He was, he had told everyone, very proud of his new Apprentice. “Well done for putting Kaznim Na-Draa in your tent,” he had said to *Tod* as he’d walked her to the door. “Keep a close eye on her from now on. Bring her up to my rooms for breakfast in the morning and we will all have a talk.” Then he had smiled and said, “I’ll leave it to you to ask her where the Orm Egg is. You have the magic touch.” *Tod* hadn’t been too sure about that, but she’d been delighted that Septimus trusted her so much.

And now *Tod* stared at the Kaznim-shaped space in her bed, horrified. She had blown it. All Septimus’s trust was for nothing. Frantically, *Tod* threw on her clothes, raced out of the dorm and ran into the early-morning quiet of the Apprentice corridor. She stopped at the spiral stairs, which were traveling slowly on nighttime mode, heading downward. Above, *Tod* heard the unusual sound of footsteps—someone was running down. To her utter relief she saw Kaznim approaching at top speed. *Tod* was amazed at how Kaznim had overcome her fear of the stairs. “Hey!” she called out.

“Go away!” Kaznim shouted as she rattled past.

Tod leaped on and clattered after her. “Hey, wait!” she said.

“Go *away!*” Kaznim yelled back and hurried on, whirling around like a top.

“Kaznim . . .” *Tod* was getting dizzy, but she dared not slow down. “Kaznim . . . please . . . What’s the matter?”

Kaznim stopped and turned around, furious. “I hate this place. And I hate you. You stole my box, you stole my cards and if you had found it, you would have stolen my **Egg Timer** too—”

“No! No, I didn’t steal anything,” Tod protested a little guiltily.

“Yes, you did! You took the cards when I was asleep. I woke up in the dark and they weren’t there!” Kaznim’s angry voice echoed into the Great Hall as the stairs took them slowly down past the flickering pictures, bright in the dawn dimness.

“Shh!” It was not done to shout in the Great Hall, and Tod felt responsible for Kaznim’s behavior. “Look,” she said quietly, “I didn’t steal your box. *No way*. I didn’t steal your cards, either. Okay, I admit I borrowed them, but that’s all. I’m sorry, but you were asleep and I couldn’t ask you. I gave them back.”

“So what!” Kaznim snapped. “It was *my* stuff and you took it. You’re a nasty, sneaky pickpocket and *I hate you*.”

“I’m really sorry, Kaznim, but you see—”

The stairs had now reached the ground and Kaznim—whose anger had driven away her fear of the stairs—jumped off without a thought. While the words wandering across the floor bid her *GOOD MORNING, YOUNG GUEST, HAVE A HAPPY DAY IN THE WIZARD TOWER*, Kaznim yelled, “You’re all murderers and thieves!”

Tod jumped off the stairs to an accompanying wish from the floor—*GOOD MORNING, EXTRAORDINARY APPRENTICE, HAVE A HAPPY DAY WITH YOUR NEW FRIEND*—and hurried to catch up with Kaznim. “No, Kaznim . . . wait. We’re not thieves. And there’s no way we’re murderers. Honestly, we’re not . . .”

Kaznim stopped and spun around, her dark eyes blazing with anger. “Yes, you are! That horrible murderer woman has *stolen my tortoise!*”

Tod knew exactly who she meant. “Kaznim, Dandra hasn’t stolen your tortoise. You *gave* it to her.”

“I gave my tortoise to *Sam*,” Kaznim yelled. “Not her!”

Tod was relieved to see that apart from Jim Knee wrapped in a fur coat, sleeping on the visitors’ bench, there was no one in the Great Hall to hear Kaznim shouting. “Is that where you went just now? Up to the Sick Bay?” Tod asked, following Kaznim as she headed across toward the open doors, beyond which Catchpole was sweeping the snow off the top step.

“Yes. I woke up because I missed my tortoise . . .” Kaznim’s eyes filled with tears and made Tod feel very guilty. “So I went up to see Sam. There was no one there except for Marwick. I asked him if I could have Ptolemy back and he said yes. But then *she* came in and took my tortoise away from me!”

“Kaznim, please. I’m really sorry about Ptolemy—”

Kaznim did not want Tod’s sympathy and she knew that the only way to avoid crying was to stay angry. “You’re not sorry!” she yelled.

“I am, honestly. But I expect Dandra thought that Sam still needed Ptolemy,” Tod said, wondering how to make things better. Behind Kaznim she could see Boris Catchpole coming in from sweeping the newly fallen snow off the top of the outside steps. Aware that the officious Catchpole was looking at them disapprovingly, Tod said soothingly, “Kaznim, why don’t we go up to the Sick Bay together and I will talk to Dr. Draa? I’m sure we can sort this out.”

“I’m not talking to *her*,” said Kaznim. Her voice went up a few more decibels, just as a group of elderly Wizards wandered in from the canteen. “Dandra Draa is a *murderer*. She killed my father and now she has *stolen my tortoise* and I *hate* her! I hate everyone in this horrible place—*every single one!*”

Tod and the elderly Wizards stood shocked as Kaznim spun around and set off at a run toward the slowly closing doors. Tod raced after her, but Kaznim was fast.

Kaznim reached the doors, wheeled around and yelled, “She’ll be sorry! I’ll be back with someone much more powerful than your stupid wizard and then you’ll *all* be sorry!” And as the doors drew dangerously close together, Kaznim Na-Draa threw herself into the rapidly narrowing gap.

“No!” Tod shouted, afraid that Kaznim would be crushed like a nut in a nutcracker. But the small girl wriggled through and the next moment the doors settled together with their familiar soft *thunk*.

Quickly Tod gave the new day’s password and, agonizingly slowly, the doors began to open again. Aware that she was being watched by Catchpole, Tod hopped up and down impatiently, waiting for the doors to open wide enough for her to slip through. Tod did not like Boris Catchpole. He hadn’t actually ever been mean to her, but there was something in his

manner that told her he would not pass up the chance. And that morning he didn't.

FUGITIVE

The silver doors of the Wizard Tower closed softly behind Kaznim and the cold hit her like a hammer. It was like nothing she had ever experienced; she could feel it seeping into her bones, thickening her blood, slowing her thoughts. She breathed in and the frosty air seared her lungs. Her thin red coat gave about as much warmth as a sheet of paper and her bare feet in her sandals ached. But Kaznim knew that there was no going back into the warmth of the Wizard Tower—at least not right then. But she would make good on her threat. She would indeed come back for her tortoise and she would not come alone. She would bring the sorcerer. Oraton-Marr was older, wiser and much more powerful than the two-faced young man with his soft blond curls and fancy purple robes. Then they would indeed be sorry.

Seething with anger and conveniently forgetting that the sorcerer she was lining up for a Wizard Tower takeover had actually stolen her baby sister, Kaznim took off down the wide, white marble steps. She headed quickly across a large courtyard lit by flaming torches, bright in the twilight of the winter dawn.

The courtyard was a strangely exotic place and had Kaznim not been running away, she would have happily wandered through, looking at the cold, white sand that was banked up against the walls as if blown into drifts, and the beautiful, dancing colored lights. But Kaznim had no time to stop and stare. She hurried toward a massive archway that led out of the courtyard, her sandals flip-flapping as she went. In seconds she was going through the arch, glancing up at the beautiful blue lapis that lined it,

reminding her of the egg at home. And then she was out. She turned briefly to check that no one had followed her, then ducked out of sight and stopped to catch her breath. Shivering violently, Kaznim stared at the scene before her, trying to make sense of it.

In front of her stretched a beautiful, wide avenue lit with flaming torches perched in tall silver torchposts that ran down its entire length. On either side of the avenue were low buildings of an ancient yellowing stone. Most of these housed shops and small businesses, somewhat obscured by a variety of stalls that were being set up in front of them. Straight down the middle of the avenue was an empty roadway, which was lined with banks of the strange, sparkling white sand. The surface of the roadway itself looked to Kaznim like white frosted glass. It was both beautiful and bizarre and she had no idea what it could possibly be.

It was the start of the course for the annual Manuscriptorium Sled Race. A wide racetrack of compacted, icy snow ran down the center of Wizard Way, which led from the Palace to the Wizard Tower. All the preparation had been done the day before, and now, early in the morning, the people were beginning to venture out to begin what promised to be an exciting day. Stalls were being set up behind the racetrack walls, and a low buzz of excited chatter filled the air. A boy selling hot chestnuts was tending a brazier on wheels close to Kaznim. He had just set the first batch of chestnuts on the griddle when he noticed a wide-eyed, slight girl in the long red coat and bare feet in summer sandals. He wondered who she was; she looked so cold that he was quite worried for her. "Hey!" he said. "Come and stand by the fire. Get yourself warm."

Kaznim smiled shyly and shook her head. She was scared that any minute now, someone from the giant stone tower would be out to track her down. Relieved that the sneaky pickpocket Apprentice girl had not found it, she took the pale blue origami paper bird from her secret pocket and with shaking hands began to unfold it. From the bird's body Kaznim took the small opal pebble, clutched it in her fist and muttered the words the sorcerer had taught her:

*Let me Fade into the Aire,
Let all against me know not Where,
Let them that Seeke me pass me by,*

Let Harme not reach me from their Eye.

Once again, Kaznim felt the warm, buzzing sensation of ancient **Magyk** enveloping her. As it spread through her body, her shivering stopped and when the chestnut boy turned around to offer her a bag of hot chestnuts, he couldn't see her. It was strange, he thought, that he hadn't seen her go.

SQUEEZE-THROUGH

Inside the Great Hall, Tod watched the doors to the Wizard Tower begin to open once more. “I hope you’re not planning to do a Squeeze-Through like your young friend,” Catchpole said. Running through the doors before they were fully open was known as a “Squeeze-Through,” and Apprentices were banned from doing it. It was considered bad form even for Wizards not to wait until the doors had fully opened and settled onto their hinges.

Desperation made Tod brave. “I *have* to get out. It’s an emergency,” she said, edgily eyeing the doors, which always moved slowly in frosty weather.

“An *emergency*,” Catchpole said mockingly. “Huh! And *I’m* a banana.”

“You said it,” Tod muttered under her breath.

The doors were now showing a gap just about wide enough for her to get through, but Boris Catchpole had planted himself in front of it with his broom held horizontally. He looked down at Tod pompously. “An ExtraOrdinary Apprentice is expected to set an example,” he said. “She is not expected to have a slanging match in the Great Hall nor is she expected to play tag within the confines of the Wizard Tower.”

“It’s not tag!” Tod shouted in exasperation, and heard tut-tutting from the elderly Wizards who were now discussing the bad behavior of modern-day Apprentices. “I *told* you, Catchpole. It’s an emergency.”

“Rules is rules,” Catchpole said, doggedly holding the broom across the ever-widening gap. Tod saw that his gaze had shifted and was now fixed on someone behind her. “*You’ll* have to wait an’ all,” Catchpole told whoever it was. Tod glanced back, expecting to see one of the elderly Wizards, but to

her surprise she saw Jim Knee. He stood, tall and resplendent in his long fur coat, glaring at Catchpole. The jinnee, like all jinn who were at a Master's disposal, disliked authority. Jim Knee particularly disliked the Catchpole variety: the relish of enforcing petty regulations. He had had a few Masters like that himself, and he didn't like to see a young Apprentice being treated in this way.

"Let the Apprentice leave as she wishes," Jim Knee said. There was a threat in his voice that would have given most people a jolt of fear, but Boris Catchpole, who was not the most subtle of people, did not notice. He positioned himself firmly in front of the gap and held tightly onto the broom. "Let . . . her . . . leave," Jim Knee repeated.

"She can go out when the doors is fully open like everyone else does," Catchpole retorted.

Jim Knee stared at Catchpole with narrowed eyes. A long, low growl rippled through his body, making the hairs on the back of Tod's neck stand up. Jim Knee began to shiver and sway. There was a sudden flash of yellow and Catchpole screamed. Planted firmly in Jim Knee's place, teeth bared, muscles flexed, ready to pounce, was a long, low, yellow-and-black-striped tiger. A menacing snarl filled the Great Hall, a distant Wizard shrieked and Catchpole fainted—but not before Tod had seized her chance and raced out of the ever-widening gap into the frosty early-morning air. She stopped at the top of the steps. It was as she had feared. The courtyard was deserted. Kaznim had gone.

UNSEEN

With the tiger bounding at her side, Tod raced across the courtyard and through the Great Arch. Wizard Way was beginning to fill as arrivals from the early-morning Port Barge mingled with the Castle stallholders. Tod scanned the scene before them. “I *have* to find her, Jim Knee,” she said desperately. “She’s our only clue to where the Orm Egg is. I promised Septimus I’d look after her, and all I’ve done is lost her.”

In the shadows of her **UnSeen**, Kaznim, who was standing no more than a few feet from Tod, saw the tiger and froze. They had sent a wild beast out for her—*just as the Red Queen did for her father*. Kaznim prayed to the Sand Spirits that the tiger would not smell her scent.

The tiger was, however, far more interested in the scent of the hot-sausage-sandwich cart trundling toward them. It growled hungrily, opened its mouth and flicked its huge pink tongue around its black lips. A string of tiger saliva dripped onto the snow. Terrified, Kaznim shrank back against the wall.

Tod felt utterly deflated. Her only hope had been that Kaznim would be easy to spot. Not many people in the Castle wore red, partly because it was the Queen’s color and partly because it was the fashion to wear natural shades. Tod had also hoped that Wizard Way would be deserted, as it usually was at such an early hour, but today was the day of the Manuscriptorium Sled Races and she had not realized how early the preparations would begin. Before she had been asked to **PathFind** Jim Knee to his first desert, Tod had been due to represent the Wizard Tower in the Apprentice Race. She had put in a few practice runs and loved it. She

pushed aside a pang of regret at the thought of her substitute having all the fun. Some things, she told herself, were more important than a sled race.

Aware that the seconds were ticking away fast, Tod scanned the hive of activity before her: people setting up stalls, Manuscriptorium scribes erecting barriers and hanging banners, marshals trying to keep the sled course clear and in the midst of it all, the hot-sausage-sandwich cart banging into everyone's legs and getting sworn at for its trouble.

Desperately, Tod searched the sea of grays, browns and muted greens for a flash of color. A red scarf caught her eye but it belonged to Foxy, a lanky scribe who was tending the banks of snow that separated the sled course from the spectators.

Where had Kaznim gone?

From the safety of her **UnSeen** Kaznim stared at Tod and Jim Knee. *Please, she silently prayed, please let them go away. Please.* She did not dare move, for she knew they would see her footprints appearing in the cold white sand.

Tod now became aware of a feeling that she was being watched. Remembering what Septimus had told her about being still and listening to what she felt, she stopped searching the Way for a glimpse of red and concentrated hard. Suddenly she caught a tang of unfamiliar **Magyk**. She turned around and looked at the spot where it came from—a patch just in front of the courtyard wall where two small footprints were planted in the snow.

Kaznim saw Tod looking straight at her and she understood that it was all over. She closed her eyes and waited for the tiger to pounce. Suddenly there was a scream.

“Aiiieeee!” It was the sausage-sandwich cart boy, staring into the jaws of a hungry tiger. Kaznim opened her eyes to see the boy racing past her, scattering sausages as he went. She watched them roll across the white sand, bizarrely making it sizzle and turn to water. She saw the tiger wolfing up the sausages, while screams spread through the throng as people began to realize that there was a tiger on the loose. As panic spread and people scattered, Kaznim saw the pickpocket Apprentice girl grab hold of the tiger's scruff and say: “Jim Knee, stop it! You're scaring everyone. **Transform** now, please. Please, Jim Knee!”

The pickpocket Apprentice girl was, Kaznim thought, surprisingly brave—and oddly polite.

Tod had no option but to be polite. It was her only hope of getting Jim Knee to do as she asked—it was not for her to **Command** Septimus’s jinnee.

However, Jim Knee was not about to give up the luxury of control over his own form and he had not the slightest intention of obeying Tod’s request. Besides, now that he had eaten a few sausages, the jinnee was beginning to enjoy being a tiger. He loved the feel of his four softly padded, broad feet moving silently over the snow, the sense of the power in his muscles and the knowledge that they would take him wherever he wanted to go. The warmth of his fur in the frosty air was a delight and the smells that wafted toward his wide, sensitive nostrils were entrancing. He liked the smooth sharpness of his strong white teeth, which did not ache in the cold like his ancient, crumbling jinnee teeth; and when he opened his mouth to catch a falling snowflake on his thick pink tongue, he loved the way everyone screamed. For a weedy jinnee, who was more used to being laughed at than feared, it was heady stuff. Why would he want to be anything else? He wriggled free of Tod’s hold and took off down Wizard Way.

Kaznim watched Tod hurtle after the tiger, shouting out, “Stop, stop! Jim Knee, please stop!” and she knew that now was her chance. She must seize it before her **UnSeen** wore off and the Apprentice girl and her wild beast tracked her down. Quickly, Kaznim smoothed out the blue paper bird in which her **Charm** had been wrapped and once more read the words:

THE MAGYKAL MANUSCRIPTORIUM
AND SPELL CHECKERS INCORPORATED
NUMBER THIRTEEN WIZARD WAY, THE CASTLE.
AS PREMIER ADVISORS TO THE FABLED WIZARD TOWER,
WE ARE PROUD TO OFFER A NEW GLOBAL SERVICE.
WE HAVE MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS’ EXPERIENCE.
WE CAN SOURCE MOST REQUIREMENTS.
WE HAVE AN EXTENSIVE STOCK OF
CHARMS, RUNES AND SPELL BOOKS
OR WE CAN REFURBISH YOUR OWN.

CONVENIENTLY SITUATED ON THE ANCIENT WAY SYSTEM FOR EASY ACCESS FROM
ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD.

Kaznim read the last line of the flyer again: *Anywhere in the World*. A thrill of happiness ran through her. If the Manuscriptorium could get messages all the way to her tent, then it could get *her* there too. As the wave of tiger-related screams rolled away into the distance, Kaznim followed a small signpost with a finger pointing to: *The Manuscriptorium*. It led her to a line of shops almost hidden behind the banks of white sand. As she walked toward number thirteen, Kaznim felt as though she were taking the first steps on her journey home.

TIGER TROUBLE

At the other end of Wizard Way, Tod's troubles were mounting fast. People were not taking kindly to the presence of a tiger bounding through the middle of preparations for the sled race. Tod's chasing it, yelling, "Jim Knee, Jim Knee!" did not go down well either. Recently there had been a variety of pranks played by a rowdy group of Senior Apprentices who called themselves the Knights of Knee, in homage to their anarchic hero, Jim Knee.

"Jim Knee! Please! **Transform!**" Tod begged as she scooted after the jinnee. Jim Knee took no notice of her whatsoever. Every torchpost along that side of Wizard Way was now festooned not only with race banners but also with the more agile of the stallholders. A stampede across the sled racetrack had led to bodies sprawled across the slippery ice as though in the aftermath of a battle. And through the chaos loped Jim Knee, excited by his tiger-ness, loving the cool, sprung padding of his tiger feet, the smell of fear and the heady feeling of power.

Desperately, Tod tried to calm the panic. "It's not a real tiger!" she yelled. "It's only Jim Knee!"

But the mention of Jim Knee only led to shouts of "Shame on you, Apprentice!" and "You should know better!"

Jim Knee raced on, scattering people as he went, and Tod knew he was loving every second. She at last caught up with the tiger at a bacon sandwich stall where he was demolishing its entire stock of bacon. Above him, at the top of a torchpost, the sandwich girl watched in dismay.

“Jim . . . Knee . . .” Tod puffed. “Please. That’s enough . . . Please, will you **Transform** now? Please!” The tiger turned around and stared at Tod, strips of bacon hanging from its mouth like a fresh kill. It crouched low and bared its teeth, spittle shining in the sunlight. Tod backed away, scared. There didn’t seem to be much of Jim Knee left anymore. She remembered what Septimus had told her about jinnee **Transformation** and how the nature of the creature that the jinnee had **Transformed** to would slowly take over. The tiger snarled a warning and shot off down Measel’s Ope, the nearest alleyway. Tod went to follow but someone grabbed hold of her. “Tod, don’t!” came a familiar voice.

Tod spun around. “Ferdie!” she gasped. “Hey, what are you doing here?”

Ferdie Sarn was the twin sister of Oskar Sarn; both were Tod’s oldest friends from her home village. Ferdie smiled at the unexpected sight of her old friend. Ferdie’s bright blue eyes sparkled in the wintery sun, and her red curls escaped happily from beneath her green woolen hat. “Well, what are *you* doing chasing after a tiger?” she asked, looking anxiously down Measel’s Ope. “And what’s a tiger doing in the Castle—they don’t usually have them here, do they?” Ferdie grabbed hold of her companion, a blond-haired boy of about seven, and said, “No, William, you do *not* want to go down there.”

William, the son of Simon and Lucy Heap, was squirming with excitement. “But I *like* tigers,” he protested.

“And it would probably like you, too,” said Ferdie. “You’d be really soft and squishy to eat.”

William stuck his tongue out at Ferdie. “No I wouldn’t,” he said. “I’d be *crunchy*.” But to make sure the tiger didn’t get to find out whether he was squishy or crunchy, William hid behind Ferdie and gazed shyly up at Tod. He thought she looked very important in her green tunic and silver Apprentice belt.

“He’s not really a tiger,” Tod began to explain. “He’s a—” Then she remembered she wasn’t meant to talk about Jim Knee outside the Wizard Tower and stopped, feeling a little awkward.

“A secret,” Ferdie finished for her. “One of your new *Apprentice* secrets. Some kind of tiger spell?”

“Well . . .” Tod hesitated. Ferdie was an old friend, someone she had known all her life, and she longed to tell her about the jinnee. In fact, she longed to tell her about the whole disastrous morning. But, like Jim Knee with his tiger-ness, the Wizard Tower code was seeping into Tod and she felt awkward sharing its problems, even with her closest friend. “Ferdie,” she said, “I’ve got to go.”

Ferdie looked sadly at her old friend. “Okay. See you around, then.”

“I mean, I’ve got to go because . . .” Tod trailed off. It struck her that the more people there were looking for Kaznim, the better. “I’m looking for a little girl in red. She was running away.”

Ferdie looked surprised. “Running away? From you?”

“Well, yes, I suppose so,” Tod admitted as she glanced around, checking for a glimpse of red. “Ferd, this is *really* important. I’ve made a massive mistake. I *have* to find her.”

“I’ll help you!” William said. “I’m good at hide-and-seek.”

Ferdie was shocked at how upset Tod seemed. “Hey, don’t worry,” she said. “We’ll both help you. A little girl in red will be easy to spot.”

They hurried down the Way to the Palace Gates and then followed the racecourse as it took a sharp right along Snake Slipway. The ice glittered as the rays of the sun emerged above the snowy rooftops of the tall houses on either side of the winding street, and the banks of snow that lined the course shone a pristine white, smooth with the snowfall from the night before. There was a good view of the course as it ran down the actual slipway and took another sharp right turn onto the frozen Moat. On the opposite bank was an expanse of snow and beyond that, the tall, dark trees at the edge of the Forest. Tod scanned the scene for a glimpse of red while William drew faces in the snow bank.

“I don’t think she could have got this far,” Tod said. “Well, I hope not. She’ll freeze. She’s only wearing a thin cotton coat.”

“Who is she?” Ferdie asked. “Or is that another secret?” she added a little tetchily.

Tod avoided the question. “Come on, Ferd, she must still be on Wizard Way somewhere. We’ll go up the other side.”

They slid across the icy course while William skidded around excitedly, then they hurried up the other side of the Way. As they negotiated their path

through the line outside the Castle teens' favorite eatery, Wizard Sandwiches, Tod found herself fielding tiger-related complaints.

"Hey, Apprentice. Are you Wizards starting a bloomin' zoo up there?"

"Apprentice. It trashed my stall. I want compensation."

Impressed, Ferdie watched Tod politely apologizing and telling everyone that the tiger was perfectly safe. Ferdie felt a little left behind by Tod. When they had been friends in their village at home, she and Tod had shared all their secrets and discoveries. But now Tod was learning so many new things that Ferdie knew she would never understand. Ferdie was not helped by the fact that her twin brother, Oskar, was also becoming immersed in Castle life. Oskar now helped out at the Manuscriptorium and was loving it. But all Ferdie was doing right then was helping William's mother, Lucy Heap. It was fun, but it wasn't quite in the same league as her best friend or even her brother.

Tod finished dealing with yet another complaint: "I'm sorry, but I haven't got any complaint forms. You can ask Catchpole at the door."

"You're really part of it all here now, aren't you?" Ferdie said wistfully,

Tod felt awkward. "Ferd, I'm an Apprentice here. You *know* that. So of course I'm part of it. But . . . it's not all as great as you might think. Today *everything* has gone wrong. You just wouldn't believe."

Ferdie felt the old Tod reappearing. She linked arms just as they used to and said, "Hey, Tod. Nothing can be that bad. And you've always got us. You, me and Oskie, we're the Tribe of Three—remember?"

"I do remember," Tod said. "Really I do."

They walked slowly up Wizard Way, looking out for any glimpse of red. While they searched, Tod remembered how she, Ferdie and Oskar had promised one another that they would track down the Orm Egg themselves. Tod realized that, with the excitement of the Wizard Tower being on the trail of the Orm Egg, she had forgotten her promise to the Tribe of Three. But now, she reflected, it didn't matter anyway. She had let the only chance of finding the Orm Egg slip away. She was, Tod told herself, rotten at keeping promises.

Ferdie was sad to see Tod so frazzled. Nothing was worth that, Ferdie thought, not even a swanky Apprenticeship with an ExtraOrdinary Wizard. She squeezed Tod's arm sympathetically. "Don't worry," she said. "It will

be . . .” Ferdie grinned and made the PathFinder sign for “okay”—touching the top of her right index finger and thumb together to make an “O.”

The sight of the familiar sign decided it for Tod. At least she could keep her promise to her friends. “Ferd,” she said, “there’s some stuff I really want to tell you, but . . .” She looked at William Heap, who was gazing up at them, listening intently.

“But later,” Ferdie said with a grin. “Later, when I’ve taken William home.”

“But I don’t want to go home,” said William. “I want to be in the Tribe of Three.”

Ferdie smiled. “When you’re older,” she said.

William scowled. “You’re just like Mum. She always says that when I ask to do stuff.”

Ferdie laughed. She was more than happy to be just like William’s mother. She liked Lucy Heap a lot. “See you later?” she said to Tod. “I’ll be up at the Sled Shed with Oskie. You know he’s racing the Manuscriptorium sled in the Apprentice Race?” she said proudly. A thought occurred to her. “Hey, are you racing in the Apprentice too?”

“I was going to be, but . . .” Tod trailed off.

Ferdie looked at her quizzically. “Another secret?” she asked.

Tod sighed. “Not for long, I promise. I’ll see you up at the Sled Shed with Oskie before the race.”

“Tribe of Three in the Sled Shed,” Ferdie said with a smile.

“Tribe of Three,” Tod replied, and she hurried away, preoccupied.

Before she had become Septimus’s Apprentice, Tod, Ferdie and Oskar had made a pact that the Tribe of Three came before everything. But Tod’s life wasn’t so simple anymore—she had loyalties to Septimus and the Wizard Tower now too. As Tod drew nearer to the Wizard Tower she found herself envying Ferdie with her more straightforward choices. But what was really bothering Tod was the thought of telling Septimus that not only had she lost Kaznim—and with her their precious clue to the whereabouts of the Orm Egg—but she had also lost his jinnee. In fact, she had single-handedly ruined any chance they had of finding the Orm Egg.

Tod slowly climbed the wide white marble steps that led up to the silver doors of the Wizard Tower. She spoke the Password, the doors swung open

and Tod stepped into the Great Hall with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She wasn't looking forward to seeing Septimus at all. She really wasn't.

DARIUS WRENN

Kaznim gazed up at a sign that read: *The Magykal Manuscriptorium and Spell Checkers Incorporated*. Kaznim was a little disappointed. She had been expecting a building as big, shiny and **Magykal** as the Wizard Tower, but found herself outside a small, insignificant shop. She stared in the window, which was piled high with books and had a handwritten sign plastered across it proclaiming:

PROUD SPONSOR OF THE ANNUAL MANUSCRIPTORIUM
SLED RACES.

WE ARE CLOSED THIS AFTERNOON FOR THE RACING.
PLEASE NOTE: NO BETS ARE TAKEN ON THESE PREMISES.

Kaznim got rid of her **UnSeen**, took a deep breath and pushed the shop door. It opened with a friendly *ping* and she walked into a long, narrow office. Sitting on a pile of books opposite the door was a nasty-looking fat little ghost dressed in blue robes trimmed with faded gold. The ghost—the previous Chief Hermetic Scribe who went by the name of Jillie Djinn—glared at her and said, “What do you want, little girl?”

Kaznim had grown up with many spiteful Sand Spirits and knew well enough not to answer back. Careful to avoid catching the ghost’s dark little eyes, she headed toward the large desk at the end of the office where a small boy sat, almost hidden behind it. He was nervously chewing the end of his pen.

The boy's name was Darius Wrenn. He was ten years old and small for his age. His short spiky, fair hair stuck out as though in shock, and his dark brown eyes had a permanently worried expression, which was accentuated by his nervous tic of blinking rapidly. Darius was from the Port orphanage and had recently been picked for the Early Starters Scheme at the Manuscriptorium. He wasn't enjoying the experience at all and that week was the worst so far. He was on duty in the front office, which scared him because anyone at all could walk in, and now the Chief Hermetic Scribe had gone to inspect the racecourse and left him all on his own.

"Just be helpful," Beetle had told Darius, rather unhelpfully. "Oh, and if any scribes bring in their younger brothers and sisters to show off where they work—which they are allowed to do today—you must make sure that there are no running games between the desks. But remember, today is the day when we want to make people feel that this is *their* Manuscriptorium and that we are here to help them with anything we possibly can. If someone asks for something you don't understand, ask Foxy." With that the Chief Hermetic Scribe was out of the door before Darius had time to tell him that Foxy was out on the racecourse too. In fact, *everyone* was out. As Beetle had closed the door, Darius thought its *ping* was the loneliest, scariest sound that he had ever heard. He sat behind the big office desk, shivering with the cold and dreading who might come in and expect him to help them.

And so when the door *ping* announced Kaznim, Darius was very relieved to see someone who was actually a bit smaller and younger than he was. He blinked nervously and in a shy squeak repeated what he'd been told to say. "Good morning. How may I help you?"

Kaznim was not sure how to begin. "Um. I've got this," she said, and pushed the much-folded blue piece of paper across the desk to Darius. He looked at it for barely a second—Darius could read a whole page in a single glance.

"Yes," he said.

"It is from here?" Kaznim asked nervously.

"Yes," Darius said. He was not sure if he was allowed to talk about the papers. The Chief and various scribes had told him so many different things. He looked anxiously at the ghost of Jillie Djinn. The ghost seemed

unusually friendly. She nodded reassuringly and Darius's confidence returned. He smiled at Kaznim.

Encouraged, Kaznim asked, "Do you know the place where it went to?"

Darius remembered the excitement when Foxy and the Chief had returned from their amazing journey. They had not stayed long, but Beetle had made sure he knew where they—and the leaflets—had ended up. "We want to know where our first international customers come from," he had said, laughing.

"The Port of the Singing Sands," Darius told Kaznim proudly.

"Oh!" Kaznim gasped. "I live in the Desert of the Singing Sands."

Darius's eyes widened. "Wow. That's a *long* way away."

Kaznim bit back tears. "I know."

Darius possessed one precious book in the orphanage. It was called *The Wonders of the Seven Sands*. It had his father's name written inside it, lots of small dark type and three beautiful colored pictures of people in long robes and desert tents. Whenever Darius felt cold in the orphanage—which was often—all he had to do was to open the book and he was warm again. "I love deserts," Darius said dreamily. "And tents."

"I live in a tent," Kaznim said.

"Wow . . ."

"It has stars all over it."

"Beautiful . . ."

"It is. And my mother—she's an Apothecary—she works there, and . . . I miss her. I just . . . *I just want to go home.*"

Darius was speechless. He would want to go home too if he lived with his mother in the middle of a nice warm desert. Darius could just about remember his mother, although he tried not to. It made him too sad.

"But I don't know how to get home," Kaznim was saying. "I thought you might be able to help me. I thought you might know the way."

Darius did not answer straightaway. He was thinking about how he would so much rather live in a tent than the Manuscriptorium, which was just like the orphanage—full of rules that he did not understand.

Kaznim took Darius's silence as a refusal. She remembered how her mother had told her that if you wanted something from an official you must give a gift to show that you were serious about wanting it. So she reached

deep into her secret pocket, took out the **Egg Timer** and showed it to Darius.

Darius's eyes widened. He had never seen anything so small and yet so perfectly made. "That's beautiful," he said.

"It's for you," Kaznim said. "To show you how much I want to go home." And she pushed the **Egg Timer** across the desk. With a feeling of wonder, Darius picked it up.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's an **Egg Timer**," Kaznim said.

Darius thought it was far too beautiful to be given away. "I can't take it," he said.

Kaznim's face fell. "Don't you like it?" she asked.

"Of course I like it," Darius said. "But it's yours."

"I want you to have it," Kaznim told him. "Because I want you to tell me the way home. Please. I . . . I miss my mother *so much*."

That did it for Darius. If someone knew a way for him to find his mother again, he would be devastated if they did not tell him. "All right then, I'll tell you," he said. "I can remember the numbers. If you like, I could write down the Ways to your home?"

"Oh, yes, *please*," said Kaznim.

Darius closed his eyes and the numbers he needed were there, as clear as if they were in front of him on a piece of paper. He dipped his beautiful new Manuscriptorium pen into the inkpot and carefully wrote out a series of symbols, *II-X-IV-I-XI-X-V-III-IV-VIII*, onto Kaznim's precious blue paper. He pushed the paper across the desk with a smile. "There," he said.

Kaznim was horribly disappointed. These were Way numbers. Even if she could get through the **Hidden** arch in the Wizard Tower courtyard she could get no farther than the **Sealed** Hub beyond. "They're no use to me," she said miserably. "Everything's **Sealed**."

"Not *here*," Darius said proudly. "We have a Way here, and the Chief wouldn't allow it to be **Sealed**. You can go anywhere in the world from here."

At that moment Romilly Badger came through the Manuscriptorium door. Darius looked up and shoved the **Egg Timer** guiltily into his pocket. Romilly gave Darius a stern look. "I hope you're not talking about what I think you are, Darius," she said.

“No!” said Darius quickly. “No, I’m not.”

“Good. Remember your Promise, now.”

“Yes . . . yes, I will,” Darius said, blushing bright red. Romilly eyed the two children and decided they could not get up to much harm. She was already late for her duties on the racecourse. The *ping* of the closing door brought Darius back to reality. With Romilly’s words ringing in his ears, Darius realized what he had just done—*he had broken the Manuscriptorium Promise.*

Darius thought fast. He had to get the numbers back, but one look at Kaznim tightly clutching her blue paper told him that it would not be easy. “I, er, I think I made a mistake in one of the numbers,” he said. “I’ll just fix it, shall I?”

Kaznim was not fooled. She saw Darius’s flustered expression and she knew he was lying, just like everyone else in the horrible Castle. “No!” she said.

Desperation made Darius Wrenn brave. He raced around to the front of the desk and snatched the paper. Kaznim grabbed it back and gave Darius a shove, sending him flying backward. But Darius was not giving up. One thing he had learned in the orphanage was how to fight. He ran straight at Kaznim and dived at her knees. Kaznim neatly stepped to one side and Darius crashed into the pile of books on which the ghost was sitting, watching the fight with some amusement. The books cascaded onto the floor and the ghost leaped up and set about kicking Darius. The kicks **Passed Through** him and Darius felt nothing, but it is always a frightening experience to be kicked by a ghost. Darius, however, was not to be deflected. He struggled to his feet and ran at Kaznim, who was heading rapidly for the door. He grabbed her shoulder and Kaznim swung around and punched him on the nose. It was the most painful thing that had ever happened to Darius. *Ever.* His hands flew to his face and he felt the wet warmth of blood streaming onto his palms.

As Darius stood clutching his nose, overwhelmed by pain, he did not notice the ghost of Jillie Djinn beckoning Kaznim to follow her into the Manuscriptorium. The next thing Darius did notice was the discrete *ping* of the door as the Chief Hermetic Scribe came back from his inspection of the racecourse.

Beetle stared at the books strewn across the floor and Darius with his hands over his face and blood dripping through his fingers. “What on earth is going on?” he asked.

Darius stared at his boss in dismay. Two fat tears ran down his cheeks and joined the drops of blood dripping onto the floor.

Beetle knew he should not have left such a new and timid scribe alone. “Hey,” he said, putting his arm around Darius. “Don’t take it to heart. It gets a bit rough here on race day. Were they the big boys from Gothyk Grotto?”

Darius shook his head. “It was a little girl,” he whispered.

“A little *girl*?” To Darius’s chagrin, Beetle sounded amused. “Well, I must admit, we do have some fierce ones in the Castle. Never mind, Darius. I’ve just got the sled lane order to sort out and then we’ll lock up for the day. Okay? And you can have a nice glass of FizzFroot. How about that?”

Darius nodded and managed a weak smile. He didn’t like FizzFroot—all the bubbles went up his nose and it tasted weird—but Darius didn’t care. The girl had run away and the Chief Hermetic Scribe was never going to find out what he’d done. And he had a really cute **Egg Timer**, too.

THE MANUSCRIPTORIUM WAY

The ghost of Jillie Djinn took Kaznim through a dimly lit room full of high desks and down some stairs. At the bottom of the stairs were some swing doors where the ghost paused, put her finger to her lips and whispered, “Shh. I will show you how to go home, but you must be quiet and take care no one sees you. There are bad people down here.”

Wide-eyed, Kaznim nodded. She could believe that.

“So push the doors, then,” the ghost said testily.

Tentatively, Kaznim pushed. The doors swung open so easily that Kaznim very nearly fell through and then, to her horror, they swung back so fast that they hit the ghost in the face. Aghast, Kaznim waited for the ghost to yell at her and bring the bad people running. But the ghost managed a strained smile and beckoned Kaznim onward.

Kaznim followed the dumpy, shimmering figure in dark blue along a wide white corridor with a line of hissing white lights on the ceiling. It felt very exposed. There were workrooms—none of them with doors—opening off the corridor. They all appeared to be uninhabited, containing only a table with a selection of objects indicating various projects in progress: glass cases, piles of paper, pots, brushes, small tools and, in one room, a large press. Kaznim would have liked to have stopped and looked, but she remembered what the ghost had said about the bad people and tiptoed carefully by, checking each room as she did.

To Kaznim’s shock, the very last room before the corridor turned a corner was occupied. A boy with curly red hair was watching a strangely misshapen creature swathed in white doing something at a workbench.

They had their backs to the corridor but as Kaznim tiptoed by, the boy noticed the movement and turned around. Kaznim froze. The boy looked very odd; he was wearing thick magnifying spectacles through which his eyes looked like huge blue marbles. He looked surprised and said, “Oh! Queen Jenna!”

The boy was Oskar Sarn. He pulled off his magnifying spectacles and hurried out to the corridor to see if the Queen was lost and he could be of any help. But all Oskar saw was a small girl in a long red coat. He thought nothing of it—the Manuscriptorium was full of scribes’ younger brothers and sisters that day. Oskar put his spectacles back on and returned to helping the Conservation, Preservation, and Protection Scribe, Ephaniah Grebe, put together a particularly complicated automaton.

The ghost of Jillie Djinn was waiting at the turn of the corridor, tapping her foot impatiently. “Hurry *up*,” she said to Kaznim.

Kaznim did not need to be told. The boy had scared her and she was around the corner in seconds. To Kaznim’s relief, the wide, exposed brightness now gave way to the dimness of rushlights and narrow brick-lined corridors. Now the ghost picked up speed, seeming to almost fly along the passageways. The light grew ever dimmer as the rushlights became spaced farther apart, and Kaznim had to concentrate hard to pick out the dark blue robes from the shadows.

After a reckless dash down some steep stone steps, Kaznim found the ghost waiting for her in front of an iron door with four massive bolts drawn across it. “Now, little girl, first we need the key. It is hidden behind that loose brick there. No . . . down there. Where I am pointing, child.” The ghost sighed impatiently.

Kaznim scabbled at the brick and managed to free it. Behind was a long, thin key.

“Very well,” said the ghost. “Now take out that brick up there. No . . . *there*. Goodness, do you not have eyes?”

Flustered by the ghost’s impatience, Kaznim fumbled awkwardly with the second brick, which she had to stand on tiptoe to reach. But she was determined to do it. At last she pulled the brick out and saw a metal plate with a keyhole set behind it.

“Put the key in there and turn three times to the right very quickly, then four times to the left,” the ghost told her.

Kaznim did as she was told and she felt a mechanism inside the door shift.

The ghost seemed pleased. “The bolts are free now,” she said. Kaznim went to open the lowest bolt but the ghost stopped her. “No, little girl. Did your mother never teach you to tidy up? Put the key back and the bricks. Leave it as you found it.”

Kaznim hated how the ghost talked about her mother but she said nothing. Meekly, she put the key and then the bricks back and waited.

“Well, get on with it then,” the ghost said snappily. “Pull the bolts back. You’ve only got . . . ooh, let’s see, about fifty seconds now until they lock themselves again.”

Kaznim was horrified. She wrenched at the bolts—which luckily were freshly oiled and moved easily—and the door swung open.

Behind it was a brick wall.

Kaznim felt utterly wretched. “There’s just a wall,” she said.

“Ah. So you don’t really want to go home,” the ghost said. “I thought as much.”

“But I *do* want to go home,” Kaznim protested, very nearly in tears. “I do, *I do!*”

“Well, go through there then,” the ghost said.

“Through the *wall*?”

The ghost looked annoyed. “Through the arch,” she said, stabbing an impatient finger at the wall.

“Arch?” asked Kaznim. She stared at the blank wall, willing the tears to go away.

“But you can’t see it, can you, little girl?” the ghost taunted.

Kaznim remembered what Marwick had told her about **Hidden** arches: *If you want to see them badly enough, you will. With practice. In time.* There was no doubt in Kaznim’s mind that she wanted to see this arch very badly indeed, but she had no time to practice. It had to happen *right now*. So she stretched her arms out, placed both hands onto the rough brick and imagined she was Marwick—Marwick, who could see the **Hidden** arches and who traveled the Ways as easily as if they were desert paths. At last, after the longest twenty seconds in Kaznim’s life, she began to see the shimmering shape of an arch glowing through the brick. Elated, she said, “I see it! I see it!”

“Be quiet, little girl,” the ghost said. “The bad people will hear. Now show me your blue paper.”

Keeping a very tight grip on her precious piece of paper, Kaznim held it up. The ghost peered at it closely. “See the first symbol on the list that that silly little boy wrote for you?”

Kaznim nodded.

“That is the number two, which is this arch here. You just follow the symbols and you get home. Understand?”

Kaznim understood more than Jillie Djinn realized. She understood that the ghost was taking a delight in not explaining the Ways properly and she correctly suspected that although the ghost clearly wanted Kaznim to **Go Through** the Manuscriptorium Way, it was for some nasty reason of her own, not because she wanted to help her. The fat little ghost was, Kaznim thought, as unpleasant as everyone else in the nasty Castle—except for Sam and Marwick. They were the only people she was sorry to be leaving. Kaznim knew that Marwick would have honored his promise to take her home. But she also knew that was not going to be for some time, and she wanted to go home right *now*.

With an air of satisfaction, the ghost watched Kaznim step into the **Hidden** arch of the Manuscriptorium Way. “Close the door behind you,” she said.

Kaznim did as she was asked—she didn’t want the horrid ghost following her—and then, stumbling into the darkness, she walked bravely forward.

In the gloomy corridor, the ghost of Jillie Djinn folded her arms and waited. Within seconds the four bolts slid silently across the door and the ghost heard the locking mechanism slip into place. She wafted away up the steps, heading back to the Manuscriptorium where the scribes worked. Then she sat on the steps that led to her old rooms and waited, a triumphant smile on her face.

Kaznim’s route was not an easy one. It took her through a nest of snakes, a giant spiderweb, a tar pit, a circle of wailing spirits and many other strange and frightening places, but when at last she emerged into the evening sunshine that smelled of heat and the desert she knew she was home—or very nearly so. But as she walked across a quiet quayside, gazing up at the

ships, Kaznim's luck ran out. A baby voice piped out, "Kazzie, Kazzie! See Kazzie!"

Kaznim looked up, amazed and delighted. She saw her baby sister on a beautiful ship, held tightly in the arms of a hard-faced woman. As Bubba pointed and gabbled excitedly, the woman hurried away. Moments later a familiar figure with cropped hair and a steely stare appeared at the ship's rail, and Kaznim locked eyes with the sorcerer Oraton-Marr.

"Seize her!" he yelled to the guards at the foot of the gangplank.

"Who, sir?" they called up.

"The child in the red coat. Yes, *her*. Get her!"

Five minutes later, Kaznim was prisoner on board the *Tristan*. Now the Castle and the Wizard Tower did not seem so bad after all.





PART VI

FORTY-TWO HOURS TO HATCHING

CONFESSIONS

That wretched Catchpole is an officious prig,” Septimus was telling Tod. “He was just as bad when I was a boy. I loathed him.” He sighed. “I suppose you have no idea where Kaznim Na-Draa might be?”

Tod and Septimus were in the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s rooms on the twentieth floor of the Wizard Tower. Tod had just confessed that she had managed to lose not only their only clue to the whereabouts of the Orm Egg, but also the means of searching for it. Miserably, she shook her head. “I’ve no idea where she could be. She just vanished. It was almost as though she had done an **UnSeen**. In fact, I thought I felt something odd—a different kind of **Magyk**—when I first got outside the courtyard.”

“She’s too young to keep an **UnSeen** going for long,” Septimus said. “But that is very useful to know. I’m sending all the duty Wizards out to look for her, and they need to know to track any echoes of foreign **Magyk**.” He shook his head. “Though some of them would be hard put to track an elephant two feet in front of them.”

“I’d like to go too,” Tod said. “Seeing as I was the one who lost her.”

There was an awkward silence in which Tod hoped that Septimus might tell her that it didn’t matter and she wasn’t to worry, but he didn’t. What he did say surprised her. “If we don’t find Jim Knee I expect you’d like to be in the Apprentice Race this afternoon?”

Tod was embarrassed. She hoped Septimus didn’t think she had deliberately lost Jim Knee so that she would be able to be in the sled race. “Oh no,” she said quickly. And then, when Septimus looked puzzled, she added, “I mean, yes, I would love to, but I must help you look for Kaznim. And Jim Knee.”

Septimus considered the matter. “I think you should race,” he said. “People expect the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice to run in the Apprentice Race. It will set alarm bells ringing if you’re here and you don’t race. The search

party can go out right now and you can get down to the Sled Shed and tell your substitute he's off the race. And as for Jim Knee . . . well, I don't want to **Summon** him but I may have to." Septimus sighed. "I am beginning to regret giving him power over his own form."

Tod could not help but feel a little sorry for Jim Knee. She wondered how it must feel to have no control over the most basic of things—the shape that one took in the world. She imagined being in the power of someone who could turn her into anything on a whim: a scorpion, a turtle, a little yellow crab. When Tod thought about it like that, she didn't begrudge Jim Knee his precious autonomy one bit. She just wished he had been a bit more helpful about what he did with it.

As Tod stood up to go, there was a knock on the door. Like a good Apprentice, she went to open it. Outside was Dandra Draa and her tortoise.

At the sight of Dandra, Septimus leaped to his feet. "Sam?" he asked anxiously.

"No, no, not Sam," Dandra said hurriedly. "Sam is sleeping and his temperature is stable."

Septimus could see that Dandra looked hollow-eyed and upset. She was clutching Kaznim's tortoise to her as though it was the most precious thing in the world. "But something *is* wrong?" Septimus asked.

Dandra took a deep breath. "Yes, it is. I, er, I have something, um, personal to tell you."

"I'll go now," Tod said diplomatically.

"Please stay, Alice," Dandra said. "Your mother knew my story and you should too. And you need to understand what—I mean who—your new friend is."

"New friend?" Tod asked, puzzled.

"Kaznim Na-Draa—the little girl with the tortoise. With *my* tortoise."

"She's not a friend," Tod said. She looked at Dandra, remembering what Kaznim had called her: *murderer*. No one who called Dandra such a thing could ever be a friend of hers.

"Take a seat, Dandra," Septimus said. "I'm sure it can't be that bad."

Dandra thought it could. She sat down on the exotic purple sofa and put Ptolemy carefully on her knee. The tortoise stuck his head out and stared impassively at the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Septimus resumed his place in a low chair beside the fire and Tod sat on the edge of the sofa, at the other end

from Dandra. They both looked expectantly at their visitor. Dandra felt so nervous that she seemed to have lost her voice.

“Would you like a drink of water?” asked Septimus.

Dandra shook her head. She took a deep breath and began her story.

“You know that I came to the Castle because I was invited by dear Marcia for my skills in **DisEnchantment**. Her summons arrived in the nick of time, as you say here. My life was in great danger.”

Tod looked at Dandra, surprised.

“Some months before Marcia’s message, Karamander Draa and her baby daughter, Kaznim, arrived at my tent. They were destitute, but even so I was surprised to see Karamander. I thought I was the last person to whom she would turn. You see, I was the cause of her husband’s death.”

“No!” Tod muttered under her breath. Surely Kaznim could not be right?

Dandra hurried to explain. “I did not desire his death—of course not. But it was my actions that led to it. I cannot deny that.”

“We cannot always predict the effect our actions will have,” Septimus said. “If they are performed in good faith, there can be no blame.”

Both Dandra and Tod looked gratefully at Septimus. He had a way of making sense of things in a few words.

“Thank you, Septimus.” Dandra continued. “It all began when I was assistant to the court physician of the Red Queen. I worked at the palace in the Red City—so called, they said, for the color of the rock upon which it stood, but the people who lived there knew it was for the blood spilled within its walls. As assistant physician in the Royal Hospital I was relatively safe and I counted myself lucky. We were protected by the palace livery we wore and were not subject to the numerous acts of terror perpetrated by the city guards. Neither were we part of the court intrigues, which were the downfall of so many.

“We grew our medicinal herbs in the palace gardens and it was there that I met the Red Queen’s son, Salazin. Salazin was fascinated by Physik, as you call it here, and he would ask me endless questions. Slowly, we fell in love. But it was hopeless. He was betrothed to another and even if he had not been, he would never have been allowed to marry a mere physician—despite the fact that actually that was what he himself dearly wanted to be.

It was hopeless. We knew it was.” Dandra paused and looked up at Septimus. “So we planned to run away.”

“Yes,” said Septimus, and then he remembered that he was not meant to know the story. In the confidence of the handover from one ExtraOrdinary Wizard to another, Marcia had told him absolutely everything. With his new diplomatic skills, honed by his year as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Septimus decided to say nothing but to listen to what Dandra said next. He resumed his neutral expression while Dandra continued.

“We disguised ourselves as traders. I cut my hair short and we became a boy and his merchant master with trading packs. I put Ptolemy into the top of one of the packs and told him to stay still. Then, early in the morning, when a caravan of traders left the city we tagged along. Apparently no one noticed our absence until Salazin did not arrive for an important meeting; even then it was not much remarked upon. It was not the first time he had missed a meeting, Salazin found Court life very tedious. I had covered my absence by leaving a note saying that I had gone into the desert to find a rare plant. However, as night fell, people began to talk. It seems our love was not the secret we had thought. The Queen was furious. She sent out a runner to track us down. The runner was my cousin Karamander’s young husband.

“The Queen ran a cruel regime. It was a terrifying thing to be chosen as a runner, for failure meant certain death. So I can only imagine what Karamander must have felt when her husband told her he had been chosen to go. Karamander’s husband arrived at our caravan at midnight. I remember to this day seeing him silhouetted against the moon as he crested the nearby dune and cantered down to our encampment. Salazin and I knew we were in great danger and so I gathered all my **Magykal** powers and helped him use the **UnSeen** I had so carefully taught him. When I saw him slowly *Fade into the Aire*, I did the same **Unseen** so that we could still see each other.” Dandra laughed, embarrassed. “Oh, I apologize, ExtraOrdinary Wizard. I forget myself. You know such things.”

“A few,” Septimus admitted with a wry smile.

“We moved a safe distance away so that no one would bump into us and sat watching Karamander’s poor husband search for us. The people we had traveled with were as puzzled as he was, for once he had explained who he was after they knew it was us. Soon the whole camp was in uproar looking

for us. I became concerned that our footprints would give us away, but we stayed still and prayed that the fuss of the search and the darkness would cover them. Our prayers were answered and we were not discovered. As dawn broke, we watched Karamander's unlucky husband head slowly for home, knowing he went to a terrible fate. I believe he was thrown to the Queen's lion that night. But what could we do? It was him or us.

"We dared not return to the caravan, so we stayed **UnSeen** and watched them pack up and leave. When they were gone we took our own way south, heading for a group of lakes where we knew good people lived. We had such plans . . ."

Septimus saw tears glistening in Dandra's eyes. "It's all right, Dandra," he said. "You really don't need to tell—"

"But I *do*," Dandra interrupted him. "For my Salazin's sake, I do. So that at least someone will know how brave he was."

"Of course," Septimus said soothingly. "Of course."

"Our plans . . . Salazin would become my Apprentice and I would teach him all I knew so that he could fulfill his dream and become a physician too. We would be together. We would be happy. Simple dreams . . ." A tear escaped from Dandra's eye and landed on Ptolemy's shell.

"We traveled through the heat of the day and decided not to make camp that night but to carry on. We wanted to put a safe distance between us and the Red City, for we knew the long arm of the Queen stretched far. But as we walked wearily into the dawn of our second day of freedom, we were spotted by a new band of runners. Quickly we did our **UnSeens** once again. But this time it did not go well."

Dandra took a shuddering breath. Septimus felt great sympathy for Dandra. He still had flashbacks to his time as a boy soldier in the notorious Young Army, and even now a deep sense of fear would unexpectedly wash over him at odd times.

Clutching the tortoise to her like a comfort blanket, Dandra continued her story. Septimus and Tod heard how Salazin had bungled his **UnSeen**. They heard of Dandra's guilt that *her* **UnSeen** had worked. How Salazin had refused to give her away. How he had looked straight at her **Invisible** self and how the expression in his eyes had told her farewell. How she had watched him being taken away, tied onto a horse facing backward, to what Dandra knew would be a terrible fate.

“I wandered **UnSeen** for days,” Dandra told them. “In fact, I decided to remain **UnSeen** for the rest of my life. I didn’t want to speak to anyone ever again. But after many days I came to a large, faded tent covered with silver stars, and from within came the sound of wailing. It was a cry of grief that I understood. I knew someone in there had died. A boy ran from the tent and he saw me. I will not trouble you with more details, but his father, an Apothecary, had died. Of course, you will guess what happened. I stayed to look after the boy, Mysor. I took over the practice and Mysor became my Apprentice. Things went well—until some months later, Karamander Draa turned up.

“I took her in. Of course I did. I felt I owed her *that* at the very least. All was good for a few months. Karamander was a willing helper and little Kaznim was a joy to be with. But then others began to arrive, people whom Karamander called cousins—although I recognized none of them. She asked me to let them stay awhile and I felt unable to refuse. If I dared to suggest it was time they moved on, Karamander would break down in tears about her husband and the terrible death he had endured. Still more ‘cousins’ kept arriving, and I was soon vastly outnumbered and frightened by the amount of weapons the newcomers brought with them. My medical practice began to suffer as people who had trekked for miles to see me felt threatened. I began to suspect that Karamander had come to seek revenge.

“I was right. One morning I heard them plotting to kill me while I slept. That very day Marcia’s message inviting me to the Wizard Tower arrived, and never was a message more welcome. Late that evening I left a note for Mysor—who I knew would be safe, as Karamander clearly liked the boy—but I could not find Ptolemy. So alone once more I stole into the night and trekked to the Port of the Singing Sands. I took the first ship out the very next morning and as the land dropped beneath the horizon, I felt safe for the first time in years. But I was a fool to think I could run from this. Now Karamander has sent her daughter to take revenge and there is no escape. Not for me.”

Septimus was not convinced. “But a mother would never send such a young child on a revenge mission—surely she would come herself. And from what Marwick says, Kaznim never intended to come here.”

Dandra shook her head. “This morning, the child threatened to bring a powerful sorcerer to kill me.”

“I think,” Tod said carefully, “that Kaznim only wanted her tortoise back.”

Dandra clutched Ptolemy to herself. “He is *my* tortoise,” she said.

Tod and Septimus exchanged glances. The feud went deep.

Dandra continued. “The child clearly has access to a sorcerer, probably more than one. The Red City is riddled with them; they all vie to serve the Red Queen. Septimus, I am so sorry. I told Marcia my history and I should have told you, too. I have brought danger to your door.”

Tucking Ptolemy under her arm, Dandra stood up. “I do not wish to bring trouble to the Wizard Tower. I will catch the afternoon barge to the Port.”

Tod jumped up. “No! Please, Dandra. Don’t go.”

Septimus, too, got to his feet. “Dandra, you must stay. I do not believe you have brought trouble to our door. But even if you have, I would not wish you to go. The Wizard Tower is not a fair-weather friend. It is loyal to all within its walls.”

Dandra at last understood that she truly was with friends. Not trusting herself to speak, she clutched her tortoise to her and ran out. As the door swung closed, Septimus murmured, “Who would have thought a little tortoise could cause so much trouble?”

Tod felt she had to be honest. “I think it was my fault, really,” she said. “It was because I took the cards while Kaznim was asleep. Kaznim noticed and said I had stolen them. And she was right.”

Septimus looked thoughtful. “Sometimes, Tod, you will find you do have to do things that are a little . . . distasteful for the good of the Wizard Tower and the Castle. You did the right thing.”

Tod shook her head. “I wanted it to be the right thing,” she said. “But afterward it didn’t feel that way.”

“You did what you felt was right at the time, for the right reasons—to find the Orm Egg,” Septimus said. “And getting that egg *is* the most important thing right now, don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Tod said—and then immediately felt bad because she had actually made it more difficult. “I’d do anything to find the Orm Egg,” she said. “*Anything.*”

Septimus did not like to see his new Apprentice so upset. He knew she blamed herself for losing Kaznim and Jim Knee. “Tod,” he said. “If I had

been thinking straight last night I would have put a guard outside the dorm to stop Kaznim from running off. Her disappearance is not your fault, okay?”

Tod nodded.

“And as for Jim Knee—well, I am that wretched jinnee’s Master and as such I am, unfortunately, responsible for all he does. You do understand that?”

Tod nodded again.

Septimus stood up. “Now get yourself down to the Sled Shed and win the Apprentices’ Cup for the Wizard Tower.” He took a small card from his pocket and quickly scribbled something on it. “I hear Drammer Makken is your substitute,” he said. “Give him that and he won’t make trouble.”

“Thanks . . .” Tod took the card reluctantly. The sled race seemed rather frivolous after Dandra’s story.

“And I shall look for that jinnee of mine. If I’ve not found him by the time the race is over—and you have won, of course—I will **Summon** him. I don’t want to do that—it might damage him—but if it’s a choice between a damaged jinnee and none at all, then I shall have to take the damaged one.”

“Poor Jim Knee,” Tod murmured.

“Indeed,” Septimus said. “But don’t forget, this life—or series of lives—was a choice she freely made.”

“*She?*” Tod asked.

“Yes. I understand that Jim Knee was a woman married to a turtle trader when she decided to take the Path of the Jinn. Now, I have something for you.” Septimus took a small purple cloth from his pocket. “For the runners,” he said.

“Runners?” Tod asked, puzzled. She was still trying to imagine Jim Knee married to a turtle trader.

“For the Wizard Tower Sled. A secret weapon.” Septimus grinned.

Tod eyed at the cloth uncertainly. “But the rules say that no new **Magyk** is allowed.”

“Quite right too,” Septimus said. “But it’s not **Magyk**. It’s just a normal cloth that Beetle—I mean, the Chief Hermetic Scribe—gave me some years ago. He knew every way to get the best from a sled. He was a terrifyingly fast sledder. Still is, believe it or not.”

Tod did believe it. There was something boyish about the Chief Hermetic Scribe that she really liked. She often found herself about to call him “Beetle” and then remembered that a Year One Apprentice must be more respectful.

“The cloth removes even the smallest particle of dirt so the blade of the runner is smooth as glass,” Septimus explained. “You’ll need to take more care on the ice at the start as you’ll find the sled harder to control, but once you’ve got down to the deep snow on the other side of the Moat, you’ll be amazed the difference it makes. Trust me, I won my last Senior Apprentice Race because of it.”

Tod took the soft purple cloth and a swirl of butterflies fluttered through her stomach. Suddenly the race seemed very close.

“I will see you on the starting grid,” Septimus said. “But now I must be off to find that jinnee. Time is ticking away.”

THE EGG TIMER

The past few hours had seen a huge change at the starting grid. As Tod emerged from the Great Arch she found a large race board had been nailed to the outside of the courtyard wall. Foxy was writing in the names of the sleds in his looping writing and Rose, his girlfriend and recently qualified Ordinary Wizard, was reading the list of races out to him. Rose smiled at Tod as she emerged from the blue shadows of the archway. “Good luck,” she said.

“Oh! Thank you,” Tod replied. Tod liked Rose a lot. They shared an interest in **Charms** but Tod had the feeling that when she was with Septimus, Rose avoided her.

“I’ll be cheering for you,” Rose said. “We all will. Everyone loves the Apprentice Race.”

Tod smiled nervously. She was beginning to realize what a huge event this was. She pushed her way through the small crowd watching Foxy’s loopy writing slowly reveal the lane order of the sleds, and headed across the top of the starting grid, now marked out in squares and bedecked with a huge banner reading *START* strung across the torchposts. Tod squeezed through a group of teens dressed in black—she guessed they were from Gothyk Grotto—and headed for the alleyway that led to the Sled Shed. This now had a rope slung across it and Darius Wrenn was standing awkwardly behind it. He had a clipboard tucked under his arm and was gazing at the little **Egg Timer** glinting in his hand. Seeing Tod’s gaze, Darius quickly shoved it into his pocket, picked up his clipboard and tried to look official. “How bay I help you?” he asked.

“Gosh,” said Tod. “What have you done to your nose?”

Darius sniffed. “Nuffin,” he said. “How bay I help you?”

“I’m racing,” Tod said. “Can you let me through, please?”

Darius looked at Tod’s very fine Apprentice belt and asked, “Are you the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice?”

“Yes. I’m in the first race.”

Encouraged by his correct identification, Darius peered at his clipboard and frowned; something did not make sense. “You’ll have to wait for the others,” he said.

“Other what?” Tod asked, confused.

“Other . . . *people*?” Darius asked. Who knew what the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice might want to bring? Yesterday afternoon an Ordinary Apprentice had brought in a **ShapeShifted** cat in the shape of a large and very hairy spider and just dumped it on the desk.

“But there aren’t any other people,” Tod said.

“Oh. Right. So which one are you?”

Suddenly Tod understood. “I’m all of them,” she said. “I am Alice and Tod and Hunter and Moon.”

Darius looked impressed. “Wow. Four people at once. That is an *amazing* spell.”

“So will you let me through now?”

Darius very carefully crossed all Tod’s names off. “Yes, you can *all* come in.”

Darius unclipped the rope and, emboldened by his success in letting in four people at once, said, “Excuse me. But, um, how can you tell if something is **Magykal**?”

Pleased to be asked something she could actually answer, Tod said, “Well, usually you can **Feel** the **Magyk** in it,” she said.

“Can everyone do that?” Darius asked.

“Not everyone,” Tod said.

“Can *you*?” Darius persisted.

“Yes, I can—well, most of the time,” Tod said.

Darius took the little **Egg Timer** out of his pocket. “Could you tell me if this is **Magykal**?” he asked. “I think it might be, because the grains inside behave kind of funny.”

Tod was surprised that such a scruffy little boy would have such an exquisite object in his pocket. “I’ll have to hold it,” she said. “Is that okay?”

Darius nodded and handed over the **Egg Timer**. A jolt of ancient foreign **Magyk** tingled through Tod’s palm. “It is **Magykal**,” she said. “And it’s not from here. Where did you get it?”

“A little girl gave it to me,” Darius said, feeling guilty. “I . . . I didn’t want it. But she made me take it. Honestly.”

Something that Kaznim had yelled at her as she had raced down the stairs came into Tod’s head: *And if you had found it, you would have stolen my **Egg Timer** too.* “Was the little girl wearing red?” Tod asked.

Darius nodded.

It had to be Kaznim, Tod thought excitedly. “Do you know where she is now?” she asked.

Darius shook his head. “She ran away. I think the ghost scared her.”

“Which ghost was that?” Tod asked.

“The horrible one we have in the Manuscriptorium,” Darius said.

Tod knelt down beside Darius. She could see he was timid and she didn’t want to frighten him. “You’re Darius, aren’t you?” she asked.

Darius nodded.

“Well, the thing is, Darius, that little girl has something very important that we need at the Wizard Tower. Something really, really important. And this might help us find it.”

Darius knew he should never have accepted such a wonderful thing. “Please,” he said, holding it out to Tod. “Please, you take it.”

Tod shook her head. She didn’t want to risk taking the **Egg Timer** on the sled race. “How about I tell the ExtraOrdinary Wizard?” she suggested. “Then you can give it to him and tell him about the little girl, too. Okay?”

Darius looked horrified. The thought of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard himself asking him questions was too terrifying for words. He shook his head and thrust the **Egg Timer** into Tod’s hand. “Take it, *please*,” he said. “I don’t want it. Really I don’t.”

Tod took the **Egg Timer** and, leaving Darius nervously clutching his clipboard, she hurried off along the cinder path that ran along the icy track toward the Sled Shed. Tod was longing to tell Septimus what she’d discovered, but she’d promised to meet Oskar and Ferdie and she mustn’t let them down. With the Tribe of Three versus the Wizard Tower playing in

her head yet again, Tod pushed open the sliding door to the Sled Shed and stepped inside.

THE SLED SHED

The Sled Shed was buzzing with excitement. Large and newly built, it replaced the old Manuscriptorium boathouse. The care lavished on the interior, with its carved wooden beams and **Perpetual Frost** floor, reflected the Chief Hermetic Scribe's love of everything to do with sledding.

One of the first things Beetle had done when he became Chief Hermetic Scribe was to search for the long-lost Manuscriptorium sled **Charm**. This was a piece of **Magykal** wood that, when a sliver was shaved off and embedded into a sled, gave it the ability to move not only downhill but also uphill and along the flat. Beetle had eventually discovered the **Charm** by happy accident. It had been used to repair a chair on which a scribe named Colin Partridge sat. However, when Partridge decided to impress Romilly Badger by reciting the sled **Incantation**, his chair had shot off around the room, slaloming between the desks, leaping over piles of books, before other scribes thoughtfully opened the doors and allowed Partridge to go whizzing off down Wizard Way—watched by the entire complement of the Manuscriptorium, helpless with laughter. Once Partridge and the chair were rescued from the Moat, Beetle had extricated the **Charm** and set about commissioning a new sled from the Castle boatbuilder, Jannit Maarten. Jannit discovered that sled-making was good practice for her Apprentices and one sled led to another. That morning, five of the finest sat beside the Wizard Tower sled and Beetle's old but much-loved Ice Tunnel inspection sled, known by all as the *Beetle*.

Oskar was racing the *Beetle* and he had great hopes for his sled; it had what he called "attitude." Watched by Ferdie, he was rubbing down a rough

spot on the front of the runner when Tod came in. Oskar sat back on his heels and ran his hand through his springy red hair—a mannerism many of those who worked at the Manuscriptorium had caught from their Chief. “Hey, Tod,” he said, and gave her the Tribe of Three sign—three raised fingers of the right hand.

Tod returned it. “Wow,” she said. “It’s amazing in here.”

“Not bad,” Oskar agreed.

The Sled Shed was dazzlingly bright. A line of brilliant white lamps hung from the roof beams and the **Perpetual Frost** floor glittered and sparkled. Seven sleds were lined up, each one gleaming as a result of much love and attention. The Wizard Tower sled was beautiful, but it was by no means the most impressive. As a boy, Beetle’s hobby had been drawing fantasy sleds, and now the results of his drawings were there for all to see.

For the first race that day the five new sleds were raced by apprentices from the lucky shops, businesses or institutions that had won the Apprentice Race Draw. They also got to name and decorate the sled for that season. The Wizard Tower always raced its own sled, known as the *Wiz*, and the Manuscriptorium always raced the *Beetle*. In the last race of the day—the Midnight Massive—the Manuscriptorium raced all the sleds and Beetle always ran his old sled. It was the highlight of his year.

The *Beetle* stood nearest the door. One in from the door, guarded by a scowling Drammer Makken, was the *Wiz*—sleek and delicate like a racehorse, waiting patiently. The *Wiz* was made from a very dark, intricately carved wood, which was inlaid with strips of lapis lazuli. It sparkled in its Wizard Tower livery of purple, blue and gold. Its runners were narrow like skate blades, the metal was golden yellow with a thin strip of steel along the edge that had contact with the snow. At the front a gold bar ran between the two runners as they arched up toward the rider and on this hung a silver whistle, tied with a green ribbon. A long purple rope was also fixed to the bar and thrown casually across the seat. It looked much the same as it had when Septimus had used it in the Ice Tunnels below the Castle before the big Melt—except that the word “Wiz” was now painted along the side.

The next sled was a shimmering green with flashes of red. Raced by the new Palace Dragon Boy (employed in the hope of the return of the elusive Spit Fyre), it was, naturally, named *Spit Fyre*. The next in line was the *Sarnie*, raced by Wizard Sandwiches—a small and delicate sled like a fine

spider, which looked as though it might fold up at any moment under the weight of its racer: the rather large washing-up boy. Next came Gothyk Grotto's sled in matte black, called—of course—*Grot*. This was to be raced by the mask technician, who wore a tight-fitting black suit and matching full-face cat mask. Jannit Maarten's boatyard was running *Bucket*, in honor of a little boat Nicko Heap had recently lost. *Bucket* was to be raced by the newest Apprentice, a girl from the port, who had painted two eyes on the front of the runners. Last came the *Spurius Fatuus*, in the hands of Doran Drew, a young apprentice from Larry's Dead Languages. Named in honor of Larry himself, it was not a flattering tag, but the apprentice reckoned she was safe because Larry made a point of never watching the race. However, that year, Larry was secretly watching from an upstairs window.

Tod's substitute, Drammer Makken, glared at her. The newest Apprentice in the Wizard Tower, Drammer was a tall fourteen-year-old already gaining a reputation for being truculent. He wore a white bandanna around his thick brown hair. It should have read *The Best, Sucker!* but punctuation skills were not Drammer's strong point and he had left out the comma. Tod went up to him nervously. "Hi, Drammer," she said.

Drammer scowled. "What you doing here?" he demanded.

"I'm racing today," Tod said. "Sorry." She handed him the card Septimus had given her. It said: *Alice TodHunter Moon to race the Wiz in the Apprentice. Septimus Heap. EOW.*

Drammer looked at the card and swore under his breath. Then without saying a word, he strode out of the Shed.

Oskar watched him go, then turned to Tod. "I'm really glad it's you," he said. "That guy didn't understand the *Wiz* at all."

"Thanks, Oskie," Tod said.

"Hey, Tod," Benjy Pot, the Dragon Boy, butted in excitedly. "So you're racing? Sure you're ready?"

Everyone knew that the race really began in the Sled Shed, with the banter, the showing off, the technical tweaks. Tod was feeling increasingly nervous but knew well enough not to show it. "You bet!" she said brightly, slipping onto the *Wiz* and feeling for any looseness in the joints. It was not unknown for sleds to be tampered with—especially the *Wiz*, which was seen as "swanky." But the sled felt good and Tod could sense the energy within, waiting to be set free. She gave the runners a quick wipe with

Septimus's purple cloth and then, acting as relaxed as she could, she got up and wandered off.

Oskar and Ferdie were waiting for her by the door. They exchanged signs and walked out into the chill of Sled Alley. Thoughts of Septimus and the Wizard Tower began to fade and Tod felt as though she had come home: the Tribe of Three was together again.

TIGER EYES

Septimus had found Jim Knee. It had been relatively easy—all he'd had to do was to follow the screams. He had ended up in Gothyk Grotto, where the tiger was enjoying terrorizing some young teens who had come to buy the latest craze: Death Wings. These were tiny black fluttering wings, which when thrown behaved like a boomerang and came back to the thrower. They had nothing whatsoever to do with death but Jo-Jo Heap had thought of the name and it had stuck. A mass throw was planned for the start of the Apprentice Sled Race. No one knew about the plan except the rider of the *Grot* sled, and it was hoped a shower of Death Wings would give the rider—race name: Daemon Kraan—a good start.

Septimus took his jinnee back on the end of a Gothyk Grotto rope-trick rope. As they walked toward the starting grid, Wizard Way fell quiet, all eyes following the young man in purple striding up the Way with his apparently faithful big cat. People were less impressed once it became known that the tiger was “only that daft Jim Knee,” but even so, it was an arresting sight, and one that made the Castle people feel oddly proud. Where else would you find an ExtraOrdinary Wizard, a tiger and an **Enchanted** sled race on the very same day?

Suddenly Septimus caught sight of the Queen on the other side of the course, heading toward the Castle Walls. “Jen!” he called out.

Jenna gave him a wave, hesitated and then hurried over to him. As she drew nearer, she stopped. “You’ve got a tiger,” she said.

“Yes. I found him at last. Jim Knee.”

Jenna relaxed into a smile. “Ah. I see the yellow eyes now. But . . . are you sure it’s Jim Knee? Don’t all tigers have yellow eyes?”

“Do they?” Septimus looked down at the tiger, who lazily opened his mouth to display some very long teeth and then closed it with a growl. “Well, I’m pretty sure it *is* him. I mean, how many tigers *do* we have loose in the Castle right now? I suppose that’s something the Queen always knows?”

“Goodness, Sep. None, I hope!” Jenna said. She put her arm through his. “You are a silly tease sometimes,” she said. “I’m glad I saw you. I’ve been trying to get away all morning but there has been so much Queen stuff today, you would not believe.”

“Well, you’re just in time for the start of the Apprentice,” Septimus said. “I’ve saved a seat for you in the stand.”

Jenna shook her head. “I’m sorry, Sep, I’m going to have to miss it.”

“But you *can’t*. Everyone’s expecting you.”

Jenna looked miserable. “I know. I’m sorry. Don’t be mad, Sep. Beetle’s upset enough already. But there’s only three more hours of good daylight and I want to get to Galen’s before dark.”

Galen, a healer who had taught Sarah Heap all she knew about herbs and healing and with whom Sarah and Silas Heap were staying, lived in a rambling treehouse deep in the Forest. Septimus was shocked. “You’re not going into the *Forest*, Jen?”

“I’m going to find Mum and Dad. They need to know about Sam.”

“But Jen, you *can’t*. It’s dangerous—and especially for you. You know, now you’re Queen.”

Jenna shrugged. “Queen or Princess, Sep, it makes no difference. Anyway, it’s not as dangerous as you think. I’ve got . . . connections there now.”

“Connections?”

Jenna took Septimus’s arm and walked him across the starting grid.

“Oi!” came a yell from a steward. “*Getoffthecourse!*” On race day, respect for the Queen came second to the sanctity of the track.

Jenna shouted out her apologies, then she steered Septimus and his tiger away. They headed up the steps beside the final ramp that swept down from the top of the Castle Wall toward the race finish. Once they had reached the battlements, Jenna glanced around to make sure no one was in earshot and

continued walking. There was just room for the two of them on the cinder track that ran beside the polished icy snow of the racecourse.

“Sep,” Jenna said, “you know how Morwenna from the Wendron Witches tried to kidnap me just before I was crowned?”

Septimus nodded. Jenna had got the better of the Wendrons’ Witch Mother, but it had been a dangerous moment.

“And you know that if I ever have a daughter, the Wendrons will be after her as soon as she is born?”

Septimus looked at Jenna, shocked. “Jen, you’re not . . .”

Jenna laughed. “No, Sep. I am not planning on having a daughter just yet. But if I do I am determined not to be held to ransom by those witches. And so . . .” Jenna dropped her voice and looked around to make sure no one was listening. “I have been making, shall we say . . . arrangements. I have my own witches in the Forest now. Spies.”

Septimus looked at Jenna with new respect. “Wow, Jen. How did you do *that*?”

“With this.” Jenna drew back her red cloak, which was lined with white fur. Underneath she wore a Port Witch Coven cloak in deepest black.

Septimus looked disapproving. “You’ve still got that old thing?” he asked.

“Well, obviously I have still got it, Sep. This is why I am wearing it,” Jenna teased.

Septimus pulled a face.

“Hey, don’t be grumpy, Sep. It’s very useful. A Queen needs a bit of an edge to her. And this is my edge.” Jenna waved the cloak at Septimus. He stepped back and nearly slipped headlong onto the racetrack. “Oops, careful! Sep, don’t look so worried. This cloak doesn’t do much at all. I rely on other enticements—a promise of safe haven in the Palace anytime they need it. A bag of gold every MidWinter Feast and free food at Wizard Sandwiches.”

“Free food at Wizard Sandwiches is an *enticement*?” Septimus grinned. “I’d have thought never having to go to Wizard Sandwiches would work better.”

Jenna smiled. When she was with Septimus her cares dropped away and she felt like a teenager again. “You are so *mean*, Sep.”

“As ExtraOrdinary Wizard I am supposed to be mean,” Septimus replied with a smile. “It’s part of the job description.”

“Silly boy. But seriously, Sep, the thing with witches is that on a personal level, they don’t have any money at all. Some of the covens are quite rich but it doesn’t mean that the novices see any of it. And they are often hungry, especially in the winter. The newbies usually end up with just the bones and gristle at the bottom of the wolverine stew pot.”

“Oh, yuck,” said Septimus.

“So being able to eat for free is wonderful for them. And being somewhere warm. And of course Wizard Sandwiches is not the kind of place that asks questions.”

“Most of them look like they belong to a coven anyway,” Septimus said.

“Exactly,” Jenna agreed. “So you are not to worry about me. My escorts are waiting and I’m going straight to Galen’s treehouse. I’ll spend the night there and bring Mum and Dad back tomorrow.”

“But can’t your witch spies just take a message to Mum and Dad?” Septimus asked.

“I am not having Mum upset by a couple of witches turning up and telling her that her son is dangerously ill. Really, Sep. *Think* about it.”

“Okay, Jen. You’re the boss.” Septimus knew when to keep quiet.

“Yep. That’s right.” Jenna grinned.

With Jim Knee trailing disconsolately behind, the Castle Queen and the ExtraOrdinary Wizard wandered along the battlements, looking down at the bright pennants that marked the edge of the course blowing in the breeze. They walked on in silence until Jenna said, “Actually, there is something you might want to know. Jo-Jo’s girlfriend, you know, Marissa?”

“Oh, *her*,” Septimus said scathingly.

“Hmm, her. Well, she’s up to something.”

“So what’s new?” asked Septimus.

“It’s probably nothing,” Jenna said. “But my two, er, contacts say that she’s working with Morwenna on something—and it’s a big deal.”

“What kind of big deal?” Septimus asked.

“They don’t know. But Marissa told Jo-Jo that she’s through with what she calls ‘small fry’ and she included not only him but *you* in that.” Jenna gave Septimus a quizzical look. “I don’t know why.”

“Neither do I,” Septimus protested. “I’ve had nothing to do with Marissa. Well, not for ages, Jen. Honestly.”

Jenna raised her eyebrows. “None of my business, Septimus Heap. Anyway, I thought you’d want to know.”

They had reached the end of the wall and now took the steps beside the sled ramp down to the North Gate. At the drawbridge Jenna gave the bridge boy a silver crown. Everyone else paid to get into the Castle, but the tradition was that the Queen paid to get out. There was no fixed price, but anything less than a half crown would have been considered stingy.

“Bye, Sep,” Jenna said. “See you tomorrow with Mum and Dad.”

Septimus looked over to the Forest opposite. The tops of the trees were softened by snow and the contrast made the space beneath them seem even darker and more menacing than usual. He frowned. “Spies can’t always be trusted, you know.”

Jenna nodded. “I know,” she said quietly.

Septimus hugged Jenna and felt the witch cloak hanging heavy beneath the fine red velvet. “Be careful,” he said. “Please.”

“I will,” said Jenna. She stood on tiptoe and gave Septimus a quick kiss. “Bye, Sep.” And then she was off, hurrying across the drawbridge.

Septimus watched her go and suddenly he knew he could not bear to let her travel alone. And so, despite knowing he was playing with the safety of the Castle, he called out, “Jen! Wait!”

Jenna stopped and turned. She saw Septimus framed in the North Gate arch, his purple robes blending into the shadows. She saw him crouch down and talk to the tiger, and when Septimus untied the rope and the tiger began to pad toward her, Jenna knew what he was doing. She waited for the tiger to come to her. It sat down in front of her and gave a low growl. Jenna took a step back. It had a severe case of cat breath.

Jenna searched the tiger’s deep yellow eyes for any sign of the jinnee within but she could find nothing. “You *are* Jim Knee, aren’t you?” she asked warily.

The tiger put its head on one side and winked.

Jenna wondered if she had imagined it. “If you are Jim Knee, I command you to do that again.”

The tiger stared up at her unblinking.

Bother, Jenna thought. *Not blinking on purpose is just the kind of thing Jim Knee would do.* Jenna glanced across to Septimus who was watching from the shadows of the North Gate.

“He’s yours, Jen!” he called out. “Send him back when you’re safe!”

Jenna decided that Septimus must know his own jinnee. “Come with me, Jim Knee,” she said. The tiger gave another low growl and winked—twice. That was good enough for Jenna. “Thanks, Sep!” she called out.

Septimus watched Jenna walk quickly away, her cloak red against the snow, the yellow-and-black tiger loping beside her. As they reached the edge of the Forest, the tiger began to disappear as its stripes blended with the trees. Septimus squinted into the shadows and thought he caught a quick flash of silver—the telltale sign of a Wendron Witch, for the young ones all wore a mass of silver rings—and then Jenna’s red cloak was gone, vanished into the Forest.

Septimus watched for a while longer. He thought of Jenna moving through the Forest with the witches and despite himself, he was impressed. He knew that as ExtraOrdinary Wizard he should not approve of Jenna’s contact with witches. The old saying that “*a Wizard and Witch shall never agree, that one and one and one makes three,*” was true. And yet what Jenna was doing felt right. She was venturing into the Forest on her own terms. She was making it hers. Maybe that was why the Wendron Witches wanted a Princess so much. Maybe they knew that one day, if they did not get their Princess, the Castle Queen would get *them*.

THE TRIBE OF THREE

As Septimus walked briskly back along the Castle battlements, Tod, Oskar and Ferdie were sitting on the landing stage beside the old Manuscriptorium boathouse. The sky was blue and cloudless and the winter sun shone down on the icy Moat and its snow-covered banks. Bright blue and gold pennants fluttered in the breeze showing the path of the racecourse, which ran in front of them along the Moat to a ramp—known as Forest Ramp—that led up the opposite bank away to their right, marked by two tall flagposts. This took the sleds out on a long loop, routing them close to the trees some hundred yards away on the outskirts of the Forest. Although the treetops were covered with snow, the trunks were dark and the Forest beyond looked mysterious in its winter gloom.

From there the racecourse ran alongside the trees until in a breathtakingly steep dive it dropped into the Forest Pit—an old quarry. It then climbed out of the Pit and ran behind the old Infirmary before it took a sharp bend back toward the Castle and the North Gate drawbridge. After that a series of ramps took the sleds up onto the top of the Castle Wall—with a terrifying drop on either side—and then a steep descent down the final long ramp would send the sled hurtling down to the finish.

But Tod did not want to think about the race. She had Septimus to see and she had Tribe of Three business to sort out. She jumped straight in. “The Orm Egg is about to hatch,” she said.

“*What?*” Oskar and Ferdie chorused. And then, “*How do you know?*”

Tod told them about Kaznim, the cards, Jim Knee and finally about Darius and the **Egg Timer**. She fished the tiny **Egg Timer** out of her pocket

to show them.

“Wow . . .” Ferdie and Oskar said together. “That is *beautiful*.”

“Isn’t it?” Tod said, letting the little gold-and-lapis hourglass lie flat on her palm and feeling the ancient **Magyk** once more. As they gazed at it they were all amazed to see a tiny, luminous grain of silver float from one very nearly empty chamber and burrow its way into the much fuller chamber. “I think,” Tod said, “that this is some kind of **Magykal** countdown to when the Orm Egg is going to hatch.”

“Then it’s going to hatch pretty soon, by the look of it,” Oskar said.

“I wonder how often a grain goes through,” Ferdie said. “If it’s just one a day, then there’s still some time left. But if it’s one every hour, then . . .”

“There’s hardly any time left at all,” Tod finished for her.

Oskar had been thinking. “Tod,” he said, “what exactly did Kaznim look like?”

“Well . . . she was quite small. Dark curly hair and she was wearing a long red coat—thin, like a sleeping robe. Oh, and sandals on bare feet.”

“*Pigs!*” Oskar said.

“*Pigs what?*” asked Ferdie.

There was something Oskar knew he should tell Tod and Ferdie, but he had made the solemn Manuscriptorium Promise, which meant he had sworn not to talk about anything he saw or heard in the Manuscriptorium. “We agreed that our promise to the Tribe of Three comes before anything else. Right?”

“You know we did, Oskie,” Tod said. “That’s why I just told you about Kaznim and the cards and the **Egg Timer**.”

Oskar stared down at the Moat. He felt bad about breaking the Manuscriptorium Promise, but he knew what he had to do. “Kaznim didn’t run away,” he said. “She was downstairs in the Manuscriptorium. I saw her.”

Tod and Ferdie looked at him, stunned. “You saw her?”

Oskar nodded. “She was in the corridor in the Conservation basement. I thought she was probably someone’s little sister, but we were busy so I didn’t really pay her much attention. But later, when I was leaving, I saw the ghost of Jillie Djinn in the front office and she seemed in a really good mood, even though Romilly’s baby sister was lying on the floor having a tantrum. Jillie Djinn was laughing and saying over and over again that little

girls will always get their own way. It was weird how she kept emphasizing ‘way.’ It didn’t make any sense at the time, but it does now. I think Kaznim went through the Manuscriptorium Way. And I think Jillie Djinn helped her,” Oskar finished gloomily.

They sat in silence for a few moments until the high-pitched *ring-riiiiiiiing* of a bell intruded on their thoughts. Oskar leaped to his feet. “It’s the half-hour bell,” he said. “We’d better go.”

Ferdie was indignant. “Oskie, you can’t still be racing,” she said. “There are *far* more important things to do.”

“But what *can* we do?” Oskar asked.

“I have to go too,” Tod said. “I’ve got to tell Septimus about Kaznim and the **Egg Timer**.”

“So what about us?” Ferdie asked a little sharply. “What about the Tribe of Three finding the Orm Egg?”

Tod sighed. “Ferdie, I can’t keep Kaznim and the **Egg Timer** a secret from Septimus. It’s way too important. You must see that.”

Ferdie felt horribly disappointed. The Tribe of Three, she realized, was just a kids’ game—there was no way it could compete with the Wizard Tower. “What I see,” she said bitterly, “is that you belong to the Castle now. Whatever you may say, you don’t really belong to the Tribe of Three. Your promise that we would all stick together and find the Orm Egg means nothing to you. *That’s* what I see.”

“But I can belong to the Castle and the Tribe of Three,” Tod protested. “We *all* can. You belong to the Castle just as much as me, Ferdie.”

“No I don’t.” With that Ferdie got to her feet and walked away.

“No! Ferdie, wait!” Tod called out, but Ferdie did not even look back. Tod watched her friend hurry up the steps and stalk off along the top of the Castle Wall, heading for her lookout post at the old Infirmary where she was due to monitor the Apprentice race. Biting back tears, Tod turned to Oskar. “Oh, Oskie,” she said. “I *have* to tell Septimus. You see that, don’t you?”

Oskar nodded. He was learning fast how hard it was to have two loyalties. “When you think about it,” he said slowly, “all that really matters is getting to the Orm Egg in time. It doesn’t matter who gets there first—whether it’s us or someone from the Castle—as long as it’s not Oraton-Marr. And telling Septimus makes that more likely to happen. Not less.”

Tod smiled. "Thank you, Oskie," she said, and she gave him a hug.

Oskar blushed. "Anytime," he said.

Tod cast one last look after the vanished Ferdie and said, "I'd better go and find Septimus."

"Hurry back," Oskar said. "You know we've got to be in the shed five minutes before Lead Out or the subs get to race. I don't want that Drammer sucker racing the *Wiz*. I want to race against you. And win!"

Tod grinned. "In your dreams, Oskar Sarn." And she hurried off.

ON THE GRID

With no idea where Septimus might be, Tod decided to head for the Wizard Tower and hope to find him there.

A puzzled Darius unhooked the rope and watched Tod disappear into the crowd that was gathering for the start of the Apprentice Race. The sight of the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice pushing her way through caused many mutterings. *What was she doing? Wasn't she racing? What was wrong?* Tod heard them and realized how right Septimus had been about her racing. But some things, she thought, were more important than keeping up appearances. Frustratingly slowly, Tod pushed her way through the crowd. Suddenly someone barred her way. It was Drammer Makken.

“Hey,” he said. “Look who it is.”

“Get out of my way, Drammer,” Tod said.

“Okeydokey, pig-in-a-pokey.” Drammer grinned and stepped to one side. His older brother, Newt, immediately took his place and Tod realized she was encircled by Drammer’s friends. It was not a good feeling.

“Let me through, Newt,” Tod said.

Newt looked lazily at his timepiece. “Patience, Alice,” he sneered. “Of course I will let you through. In ten minutes and—ooh, let me see—twenty-three seconds. That’s when the Lead Out bell goes, isn’t it? But until then we can just have a little chat, can’t we?”

“No, we can’t,” Tod said. “Let me past.” She went to sidestep Newt but the group pushed Tod toward the courtyard wall. Newt stuck his arm out between Tod and the wall so that she couldn’t go forward. She tried to step back and found her way blocked. She was trapped.

“Get out of my way!” Tod yelled. Newt and his cronies burst into loud, forced laughter, drowning Tod’s shouts.

The seconds were ticking by and Tod was getting desperate. Her chances of finding Septimus were rapidly disappearing along with her chances of racing the *Wiz*. Tod began to realize that there was no way she could get to Septimus in time now—wherever he might be. All she could do now was race the *Wiz*, as he had wanted her to.

Tod took a deep breath and yelled as loud as she could, “Get out of my way!”

“In a minute, little girl,” said one of the larger boys, laughing.

“Little *Apprenticey-wentice*,” jeered another.

Tod had had enough. She knew there was no way the gang was going to let her free. She was going to have to do something a little more dramatic than shout. Her hand moved surreptitiously to her Apprentice belt and she took out a **Scare Charm**, one of the basic **Charms** with which Septimus had loaded the belt when she had been Inducted as Apprentice. The **Charm** was not, he had impressed upon her, to be used lightly.

Tod slipped the **Scare Charm** into her hand, made a fist and squeezed the **Charm** as hard as she could to **Activate** it. Then, remembering that she must turn it on and tell it what she wanted it to do, she yelled, “On! Set me free!” and opened her hand. There was a blinding flash of red light, and a small red ball bristling with needle-thin spikes flew out. It headed straight for Newt’s arm. “Ouch!” he yelled. He grabbed hold of his arm and leaped away from Tod, leaving her with a clear space in front. The **Charm** ricocheted off the wall, bounced back and began leaping from one member of the gang to another. In the midst of the yelps and yowls, Tod pushed her way free and headed for the safety of Sled Alley.

Darius watched her heading toward him in alarm. “Argh!” he yelled. “There’s a horrible red bug chasing you!”

Tod wheeled around to see the **Charm** bouncing after her like a faithful puppy. She scooped it off the ground and told it, “Stop.” As an afterthought, she said, “Thank you.” Tod wasn’t sure if one was meant to thank **Charms**, but it seemed only polite. The **Charm** pulled its spikes into itself and its angry red light faded. In a moment Tod had a little rubbery red ball sitting quietly in her hand. She was exhilarated. The **Magyk** had worked brilliantly. “Thanks, Darius,” she said. “Can you let me through, please?”

The sight of real **Magyk** had made Darius so in awe of Tod that all he could do was stare.

Aware that the seconds were ticking by fast to the Lead Out, Tod said urgently, “Darius, please. I have to get through.”

“All of you?” Darius whispered.

“Yes. All of us. Thanks!” Tod scooted down Sled Alley and skidded into the Sled Shed to find Drammer Makken standing proprietorially beside the *Wiz*. Drammer looked shocked.

“Thank you, Drammer,” Tod said coolly. “I’ll take over now.”

Drammer glared angrily, turned on his heel and stormed out of the shed.

“You cut that fine,” Oskar said. “You had nine seconds left.”

The Lead Out bell rang and the Sled Shed became quiet and tense. Each racer stood by their sled, and as Tod took her place beside the *Wiz* the Chief Hermetic Scribe appeared at the door, impressive in his ceremonial dark-blue-and-gold robes.

Despite his formal dress, Beetle was smiling broadly and looked as excited as any of the racers. He surveyed the lineup and looked particularly fondly at his old Inspection Sled. Under Oskar’s care it had become a sleek, low-level racer, and Beetle was impressed. Its rough wood shone with a deep, polished shine and some new and very shiny levers on the front bar promised some slick maneuvers on the racecourse.

Beetle began to speak. Tod listened with rapt attention as he complimented the racers on their sleds and wished them good luck. Tod smiled. She liked the way Beetle looked, how his shiny black hair flopped forward over his eyes, the way he always pushed it back when he was concentrating. She liked the air of seriousness he carried with him too, but today, Beetle had a carefree air that Tod had never seen before. He caught her eye and smiled. Tod smiled shyly back. She was so glad she had not run off to tell Septimus about Kaznim going through the Manuscriptorium Way.

Tod was right, Beetle *was* happy in the Sled Shed. When he needed peace and quiet in which to think, Beetle often retreated there and sat quietly with the sleds. It was not only because he loved the company of sleds, but also because it was the one place in the Manuscriptorium where the ghost of Jillie Djinn could not go. In life Jillie Djinn had never set foot in the Manuscriptorium boatshed and now she had to obey the rules of

ghosthood: “A ghost may only tread once more where, Living, she has trod before.”

It was time for the Lead Out and traditionally, Beetle’s old sled led the way, followed by the Wizard Tower sled. Feeling nervous, Oskar took his sled’s dark blue rope and set off through the wide sliding door. The frisky sled came bouncing behind him, watched with a fond gaze by the Chief Hermetic Scribe.

Tod followed Oskar along Sled Alley. When all the sleds were out, Oskar stopped and the line drew to a halt. Beetle strode to the head of the procession and then Oskar led off behind him. As they moved through the shadows of Sled Alley in the wake of the dark silk robes of the Chief Hermetic Scribe, everyone fell quiet with the sense of occasion.

They followed Beetle out into the bright whiteness of Wizard Way. The thunderous roar of the crowd burst upon them like a wave, reminding Tod of the time she and her father had once almost lost their boat in the surf. Her thoughts were cut short by a piercing peep of a whistle. The seconds stepped forward, and when Tod’s second—Romilly Badger—helped her guide the *Wiz* onto the grid, Tod felt as though she had been thrown a lifebelt.

“Someone spiked the FizzFroot,” Romilly said. “They’ve all got a bit silly.”

While the seconds were fussing with the sleds and making sure each was correctly in its grid box, Beetle’s distorted voice came through the megaphone. “*Riders for the Apprentice Race, take your places on your sleds!*”

Tod sat on the *Wiz*, untied the whistle and put it into her pocket. She placed both feet on the front bar, took hold of the purple rope and felt Romilly rest her hands on the back bar, ready for the all-important push-start. Tod glanced over at Oskar, who had Colin Partridge as his second. Partridge was bent double like a spring waiting to uncoil.

The riders focused their gaze on the course that stretched out in front of them: a wide, straight line of shiny white ice that disappeared into a sharp right turn at the far end of Wizard Way.

Beetle’s disembodied megaphone voice began to count down. “*Get set . . . Three . . . two . . . one . . . GO!*”

THE APPRENTICE RACE

A massively powerful shove from Romilly took Tod by surprise. The *Wiz* shot forward and set Tod off balance; she leaned slightly to the left and, in a shower of Death Wings, she found herself heading straight for the *Grot*. Tod leaned hard over to the right and pulled the *Wiz* away from the black spiked runners of the *Grot* in the nick of time. To her embarrassment, the *Wiz* continued on its diagonal track, now running fast toward the snow wall that divided the racetrack from the spectators. Panicking a little, Tod leaned too far to the left, the *Wiz* veered away from the wall and careered once again diagonally across the track, heading for the opposite wall. But this time there was no danger of crashing into any sleds—they were all well in front, heading down Wizard Way in a fine spray of ice. As Tod fought to get control of the zigzagging *Wiz*, she became aware of laughter and a triumphant yell from Drammer Makken: “Useless!”

Tod wished the snow would swallow her up. But as the *Wiz* once again shimmied over to the opposite snow wall, she heard Beetle’s voice above the ever-increasing laughter. “Silence! Silence, or I shall restart the race. This is a normal start for the Wizard Tower sled. Do not disturb the rider’s concentration.”

Despite most of the spectators knowing that this was most definitely not the normal start for the *Wiz*, they fell silent. The relief from the laughter and Beetle’s support gave Tod the clarity she needed. She leaned forward and whispered the words that were written on the little silver wings Septimus had given her when she had become his Apprentice: “Fly free with me.” And then it happened. Tod felt the *Wiz*’s energy gather into its very center

and at last the sled became balanced. Concentrating hard, Tod steered the *Wiz* into the middle of the track and suddenly, they were off.

A gasp came from the crowd as the *Wiz* shot down the racecourse in a glint of purple and gold, trailing a rainbow spray of minute ice crystals behind. As the last of the six sleds in front shot around the first bend, the *Wiz* was rapidly making up lost ground and the crowd's laughter had transformed to cheers and whoops of excitement. No one had seen the *Wiz* go so fast before, and by the time it, too, had disappeared, it was generally agreed that the Chief Hermetic Scribe had got it wrong. Tod had been deliberately fooling around in order to give the field a decent chance—and provide an entertaining start to the race in the bargain.

The *Wiz* hurtled down Snake Slipway and as the sled swooped around to the right in a beautifully controlled turn and entered the Moat section of the course, exhilaration swept through Tod. She felt as she did when she was sailing her boat with the wind filling the sails and the white wake of foam running behind, but now—she dared to risk a quick glance behind her—it was a rainbow-colored ice spray.

Tod took the *Wiz* across the track at the Castle bank to take advantage of the inner bend. Here the snow was clear from sled tracks but much deeper. It was now that the effect of Septimus's purple cloth became apparent—the *Wiz* cut through the snow like a hot knife through butter. As Tod leaned into the gentle curve of the Castle Wall, she became aware of cheers from the houses along the Walls and for the first time since the start, she risked a smile. With the swish of the snow loud in her ears, the wind in her hair and the spray curling up behind her, Tod headed past the East Gate Lookout Tower. A line of rats gathered on the roof waved enthusiastically, but Tod had eyes only for what was in front of her. And what she saw made her laugh out loud—she was catching up. Fast. No more than twenty yards ahead were three sleds: *Grot* and *Spit Fyre* neck and neck with *Sarnie* trailing. A few seconds later the markers for Forest Ramp came into view and she saw Oskar's sled heading across the Moat and up the ramp into the next section of the course. Not far ahead of him was the *Bucket* and in the lead was the *Spurius Fatuus*, raced with a supreme fearlessness. The *Spurius*, Tod thought, would be hard to beat.

It was on the wide Moat course that overtaking was easiest and Tod was determined to take advantage of that—there was no way she was going to

be the last one up Forest Ramp. She leaned outward, took the *Wiz* flashing across the tracks of the frontrunners and flew past the *Sarnie* in a shower of spray. Tod settled the *Wiz* into the tracks of the *Grot* and moments later was winging past the *Grot* and then the *Spit Fyre* in quick succession, both of whose riders looked shocked. Then she, too, was zooming up the Forest Ramp to the sound of cheers.

Tod and the *Wiz* were now entering the narrowest part of the course, which the riders called “the trench.” There was really only room for one sled here, two if you were being reckless. The track was U-shaped in profile with banks of snow so high that all spectators now lost sight of the sleds for some thirty seconds.

Ferdie was watching through a pair of **Enlarging Glasses** that Oskar had borrowed from the Manuscriptorium, “*So that you can see me win, Ferd.*” She saw the *Wiz* disappear into the trench, closely followed by a furious *Grot*, which had edged the *Spit Fyre* off course and into the bank. Ferdie turned her attention to Oskar. Oskar had overtaken the *Bucket* at the top of Forest Ramp and somehow in the confines of the trench he had done the impossible. To her delight, Ferdie saw her twin emerge ahead of Larry’s scribe, Doran Drew. The scribe looked wild. She was crouched down on the long, narrow sled, which shone silver against the snow, and was on Oskar’s tail, so close that their runners almost touched. They were in the straight that headed to the Forest Pit and the snow was soft and loose. The *Beetle* was throwing up a stream of slush that covered Doran’s goggles and every time she ran her hand across to clear them, she lost ground.

“Go, Oskie, go!” Ferdie yelled.

Suddenly a dip hidden in loose-packed snow caught on the *Beetle*’s stumpy runners and threw the sled to one side. Ferdie gasped. She watched Oskar struggle to pull the *Beetle* back into the smooth center of the course. He managed it well, but Doran took her chance and now the *Beetle* and *Spurius Fatuus* were neck and neck, flying along the long, wide, straight track beside the Forest, heading for the Pit.

Catching up fast was the *Wiz*.

Ferdie put down her **Enlarging Glasses** and leaned out to get a better look at the whole course. Oskar and Doran had just disappeared over Dead Drop, the precipitous slope that went down into the Forest Pit. Ferdie watched the *Wiz*—closely pursued by the *Grot*, its rider crouched like a cat,

his black robes streaming behind him—running down the long straight toward Dead Drop.

The straight was lined on the far side by the outlying trees of the Forest—tall, impassive spectators. As Tod sped beneath their overhanging branches, Ferdie caught a flash of silver from behind one of the trunks. Ferdie was not as technically **Magykal** as Tod, but she had a gift of **Feeling** the presence of people who were—or would be in the future—connected with her. And right then Ferdie **Felt** that there was someone in the Forest, watching. And not in a good way.

Ferdie was right, there *was* a watcher in the Forest. A young witch named Marissa was standing in the shadows of an ancient oak that the Forest witches (known as the Wendrons) called the Guardian, the most outlying of the Forest trees that allowed the witches to **Blend** with its shadow. Marissa wore her old dark green Wendron cloak despite the fact that she had fallen out with the coven and no longer belonged. (Marissa had also been a member of the Port Witch Coven, but she had had enough of them too. She was now what she called “freelance.”) And so, as Marissa stood beneath the Guardian, her long brown hair held back by a plaited leather headband, her Wendron cloak wrapped around her, she was as near to invisible as it is possible to be without an **UnSeen**.

The glint of silver that caught Ferdie’s eye came from the collection of silver rings that Marissa wore on every finger and both thumbs—and the reason they glinted was because Marissa’s hands were shaking. For the first time in her life, Marissa was scared. Someone had made her an offer that she dared not refuse and she had to double-cross Morwenna Mould, Witch Mother of the Wendron Witches, in order to make it happen. Maybe, Marissa thought as she stood in the shadows of the Guardian oak, maybe being freelance wasn’t such a great idea after all.

Tod was now hurtling toward Dead Drop. As if sensing her trepidation, the *Wiz* slowed and she heard the swish of approaching runners behind—the *Grot* was catching up fast. “*Go-go-go!*” Tod yelled, and the *Wiz* was gone, shooting over the edge of Dead Drop and plummeting down. Tod’s breath seemed to be pulled out of her as she fell, and then with a jarring *thump* the runners caught the slope and the *Wiz* was off, shooting across the icy floor

of the quarry. Another *thump* from behind announced that the *Grot*, too, had landed and Tod urged the *Wiz* on, gaining ground on Oskar and Doran, who were hurtling across the quarry floor, neck and neck.

The floor of the Pit was deep in snow and shadow. The winter sun never reached here and the chill struck through Tod's fur-lined cloak. Silent and fast, the silky-smooth golden runners of the *Wiz* gave it the advantage; it left the *Grot* behind and drew so close to the two leaders that their spray covered Tod in an icy dust. The steep incline out of the Pit now approached. All three slowed, but the *Wiz* less so. In the race up the incline Tod very nearly caught the leaders, but as they emerged into the warmth of the sun and the course leveled out, Oskar performed a very sneaky turn and cut across the line Tod was taking. Doran followed him, dropping back into second place, and Tod had to throw the *Wiz* sideways. Quickly she flung the sled back on track, slipped in front of the *Spurius Fatuus* and was away, hurtling after Oskar, heading for the shadows between the Infirmary and the Forest.

At her First Aid Post on the Infirmary veranda, Ferdie was relieved to see the *Beetle* and the *Wiz* emerge safely from the Pit. She watched the sleds rocketing along the darkest part of the course—the straight beside the escarpment at the edge of the Forest. The *Wiz* was close on the tail of the *Beetle*, and the *Spurius* was close behind. The *Grot* had just emerged from the Pit, the *Spit Fyre* and *Bucket* were still in it and the *Sarnie* was way back, teetering on the edge of the Pit in a fit of panic. Ferdie saw Tod take the *Wiz* to the edge of the straight and in a breathtaking turn of speed, she overtook Oskar in a daring loop. In another swoop, Oskar overtook Tod and they both hurtled on, and then Tod was once more ahead—the race was turning into an exciting duel.

“Go, Oskie, go!” Ferdie yelled.

As if in response to Ferdie's yell, Oskar once more took the lead. As he sped toward the sharp right-hand turn that would take him onto the drawbridge lead-up, Ferdie saw once more a flash of silver from the shadows of the oak. At the same time she saw Tod's sled suddenly slew across the track, hurtle over the snowbank and shoot into the trees beyond.

“Tod!” Ferdie yelled. Her fight with Tod forgotten, Ferdie leaped from the veranda and ran toward the course.

Out of the corner of his eye, Oskar had seen Tod's sudden change of direction and he knew from the way she was struggling to control the *Wiz* that all was not well. Without even thinking that with Tod out of the running he was very likely to win the race, Oskar skidded the *Beetle* to a halt and turned around, very nearly crashing head-on into the oncoming *Spurius*. Doran zoomed past with a whoop of triumph.

Ferdie ran toward Oskar, yelling, "Oskie, Oskie, wait for me!" In seconds she had jumped onto the back of the *Beetle*, yelling, "There's something in the Forest, Oskie. Something waiting for Tod!"

A chill of fear went through Oskar. He took the *Beetle* through the break in the snow embankment where the *Wiz* had ploughed through and headed into the trees.

On the course behind him, a nervous *Sarnie* wobbled by.

OVERRIDE

All along the straight, Tod had felt the *Wiz* wanting to pull toward the Forest and as they drew near an ancient oak, she saw a flash of silver in the shadows below the tree. A stab of fear shot through her—*someone was waiting for her*. Tod leaned forward to force the *Wiz* onward, but suddenly realized she no longer had control of the sled. And then it happened—the *Wiz* shot across the track and through the snow embankment. The next moment Tod and the *Wiz* were bumping along the Forest floor and as they sped past the oak tree, out of the corner of her eye Tod saw a witch beneath the tree, watching her—but when she turned to look straight at her, Tod saw nothing but thick green shadows.

Tod felt very scared indeed. All the stories of the Forest that were told at night in the Junior Girls' Apprentice Dorm came back to her. As the *Wiz* slalomed through the trees, Tod clung to the sled, unsure whether she was more scared of falling off or staying on. The *Wiz* hurtled along, bumping over the stony ground, which was covered with only a thin layer of snow. A sheer rocky escarpment, dark and dripping with snow-covered moss, now rose up before her, and it seemed to Tod as though the sled was heading straight for the rock face, intent upon its own destruction. As she readied herself to jump off—a frightening prospect, as the sled was going extremely fast—Tod saw a fissure in the rock straight ahead and she knew that was where the *Wiz* was going. She must jump now . . . now . . . And then it was too late. The *Wiz* shot into the deep, dark narrowness of a sheer-sided canyon and Tod was with it. Where they were going she had no idea, but wherever it was, she and the *Wiz* were going together.

Marissa almost cried with relief as she watched Tod and the *Wiz* disappear into the gulley. She had forgotten to **Bind** Tod to the sled and had been afraid that the Apprentice would throw herself off it at the last minute, but it had turned out fine. Anyway, Marissa wasn't sure that she could remember the right **Bind**—there were so many different ones. Marissa's knowledge of **Magyk** was sketchy; she could never be bothered with the boring books that other witches seemed to enjoy reading. A smug smile spread across Marissa's face. Who needed stupid books anyway? Her **Override Enchantment** had worked like a dream.

A sudden yell of "Tod! Tod!" wiped the smile away fast. Marissa leaped back into the shadows of the Guardian and watched in dismay as a small wooden sled came rocketing through the trees in the tracks of the *Wiz*. On it rode a couple of wild-looking redheaded kids who Marissa did not recognize. She stared at them in panic. What should she do? She had enough to think about. She had the Witch Mother to fix, and the scary sorcerer was expecting her to deliver on her promise at midnight. There was no way she needed any more trouble, and those kids looked like trouble on runners.

Marissa looked across to the Castle. She saw the last stage of the sled race being played out along the top of the Castle Walls—the *Spurius* was in the lead—and she heard excited shouts drifting toward her. A feeling of wistfulness for the companionship and safety of the Castle swept over Marissa. Her deal with the sorcerer was going frighteningly wrong. First Morwenna Mould, the Wendron Witch Mother, had stuck her nosy beak in and demanded to be part of it and now these screaming kids on a sled had suddenly appeared. Marissa's plans were getting out of control and she dreaded to think what the sorcerer would do if they didn't work out.

Marissa heard cheering from the Castle and it took all her willpower not to run for the drawbridge and hurry back to her cozy little attic room. But then Marissa thought of what awaited her back in the Castle: *that loser Jo-Jo Heap, a dead-end job in Gothyk Grotto and a load of idiots who treat you like rubbish. But if you get this right, she told herself, they'll all be terrified of you. And serves them right, too. So just get after those sleds and make sure it all works out.*

And so Marissa turned away from the lights and the cheers and hurried through the silent trees, heading toward the gulley into which two sets of

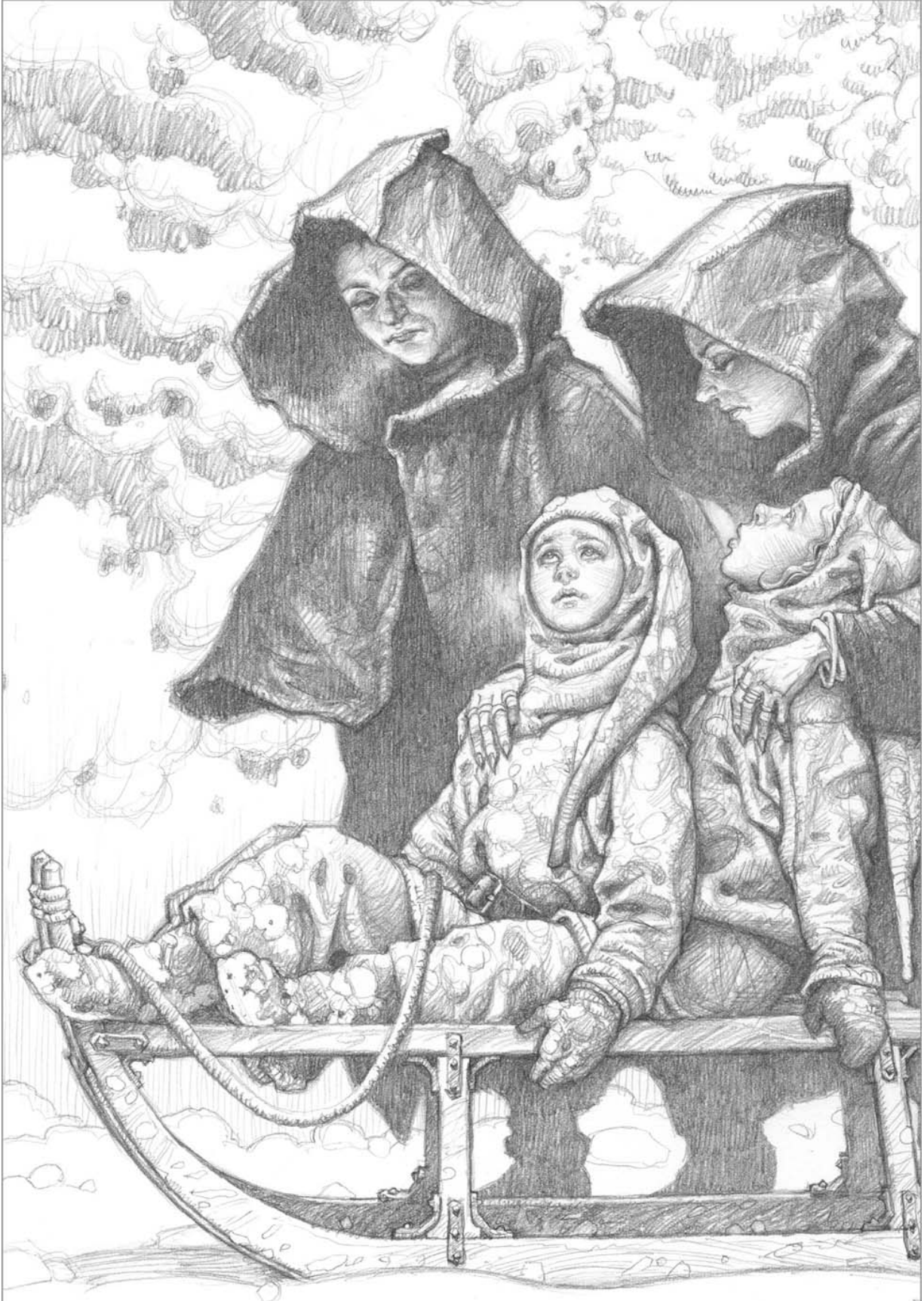
sled tracks now ran. Using **FleetFoot**—the **Enchantment** that allowed a witch to move as fast as those she was following—Marissa covered the ground at speed, her feet a blur beneath her cloak. As she headed into the canyon she heard a roar greeting the winner of the Apprentice Race: the *Spurius Fatuus*.

The *Sarnie* crossed the finish line, and still Septimus and Beetle stood waiting for their sleds to finish. Their disappointment that they had not won—or even made a creditable showing—began to be replaced with a gnawing worry. Where were Tod and Oskar? *What had happened to them?*

While Septimus and Beetle were discussing what to do, Larry from Larry’s Dead Languages rolled up to demand of his triumphant scribe whether all his teaching had gone to waste—*surely by now she could manage a decent insult in Latin? Any fool knew that “spurius” merely described a person whose father was not married to his mother. “Nothus” was what she should have used: someone whose father was unknown. The infinite subtleties of the Latin language were clearly lost on his idiot apprentice.* Larry stomped off again, leaving Doran wondering if maybe her tutor did have a sense of humor after all—albeit one a little different from most.

As Larry disappeared down Wizard Way, Septimus said, “Beetle, something’s gone very wrong. We need to find them.” Beetle needed no persuading. Accompanied by the two seconds, they hurried off along the course.

But the sleds and their riders were already deep in the Forest—and going deeper every second.



PART VII

THIRTY-SIX HOURS TO HATCHING

THE *BEETLE* AND THE *WIZ*

The *Wiz* hurtled along the narrow gulley. The sheer rock rose up on either side and was sometimes so close that it was hardly wide enough for the sled to fit. Tod was terrified—the *Wiz* was traveling with no care for her safety or for its own. Utterly reckless, the sled hurtled onward like an iron filing pulled toward a powerful magnet.

Even though she was only few a months into her Apprenticeship, Tod knew that the *Wiz* was under an **Enchantment**, and the way it was being hurled from rock to rock made her fear it was a **Darke Enchantment**. She remembered Septimus telling her about a **Darke Summons** that had once happened to his eldest brother, Simon. Tod also remembered that Septimus had told her that many people did not survive a **Darke Summons**. Tod knew that he had been warning her that being an Apprentice was not all bright, colored lights and happy **Magyk**, that it had its dangers, too. And now she was facing them for the first time.

With no choice in such a confined space but to cling on to the *Wiz*, Tod was bumped and shaken along the gulley like a marble in a box as the sled headed ever deeper into the Forest. The sharp rock walls bruised her as she was thrown against them, and low-level twigs and branches snagged and grabbed at her like snatching hands. Snow covered the ground, but it was thin in places and the rocks below jarred the *Wiz*, sending shockwaves through her.

It felt as though the gulley was going on forever, but Tod knew that it must eventually come to an end. Pushing aside her fear that the end would simply be a blank wall of rock that the *Wiz* would smash headlong into, Tod decided that as soon as the sled came out of the gulley she would throw herself off it, wherever she was. Anything was better than being dragged helplessly toward something **Darke**. Tod knew she was not **Bound** to the sled, she could lift her hands from the bar and even stand up—if she dared.

But for now she crouched down over the front bar of the *Wiz*, staring ahead, waiting for the moment the canyon would come to an end.

Tod had no idea that some distance behind her Oskar and Ferdie were on the *Beetle*, following her tracks. Oskar propelled the *Beetle* as fast as he dared, hoping to get a glimpse of Tod, but always she was just out of sight. However, the swinging branches and the showers of snow falling from them told Oskar that Tod was still ahead. But the *Wiz* was drawing ever farther away and—fearless sled racer though he was—Oskar did not dare push the *Beetle* to the limits that the **OverRide** was taking the *Wiz*. He had Ferdie to consider too.

Far behind Oskar and Ferdie came someone who was used to considering no one but herself: Marissa, out of breath, disheveled and footsore. Marissa stumbled along, cursing her bad luck.

Far ahead of Marissa, Tod was gripping the front rail of the *Wiz* and staring ahead in horror. Just visible through the overhanging branches and getting closer by the second was a sheer wall of rock cutting across the gulley. It was the end of the road.

Tod was about to hurl herself backward off the sled when she saw an opening in the rock, the round mouth of a tunnel with a light at the end. Tod dithered—should she risk throwing herself onto the ground, or stay on the *Wiz*? In that brief moment of indecision the *Wiz* left the gritty snow of the gulley and entered the cold, still darkness of rock. Its runners hit pure ice and the sled shot through the tunnel at breathtaking speed. Ahead, Tod now saw a circle of light—not dull greenish-white filtered through snow-laden trees, but bright yellow firelight. Tod had heard enough stories about the Wendron Witches to know that Forest firelight is not always a welcoming sight. Fire in the Forest usually meant the gathering of the Coven.

The *Wiz* careered out of the tunnel into the Wendron Witches' winter quarters—a wide, open space enclosed by the steep-sided rocks of an old quarry. The sled's runners hit bare rock and it ground to a halt.

Tod was welcomed by the collective **Scream** of the Wendron Witch Coven.

THE WENDRON WITCH COVEN

A coven **Scream** is a powerful weapon. When timed right, in perfect unison and disharmony—as the Wendron Witches’ **Scream** was—it renders the victim helpless.

Tod sat numbly on the *Wiz*, the **Scream** echoing around the quarry. Her hands were clamped firmly over her ears, but still the high-pitched drilling of the **Scream** bored into her head, drowning out all thoughts of escape. Tod could see nothing but a circle of faces with dark, wide-open mouths. On and on went the **Scream**, ricocheting off the rocks, while Tod sat in the center of a whirlpool of noise, feeling as though she were made of glass and that any moment now she might shatter into a million splinters.

But even witches in **Scream** eventually run out of breath, and slowly the decibels began to drop, the echoes weakened and the sound began to drain away. When at last the gaping mouths were closed Tod was left shaking, feeling as though her ears were filled with glue and her muscles turned to jelly.

In the brief hiatus that always follows a **Scream**, Tod’s surroundings began to sink in. Beyond the circle of witches in their dark green cloaks, beyond the roaring fire behind them, Tod saw the darkness of rock rearing up, topped by a fringe of Forest trees. If she had looked behind her, Tod would have seen a rock face peppered with small caves, some with ladders leading up to them, which was where the witches spent the long, dangerous Forest winter nights. But Tod did not need to look, she knew where she was; Septimus had described it to her in her Forest Knowledge tutorial. She was in the winter quarters of the Wendron Witch Coven.

Blinking as though they had just woken up and rubbing their ears, the circle of witches enclosing Tod shook themselves out of their **Scream** trance. Tod felt as weak as a newborn puppy; she could do no more than sit on the *Wiz* and watch. The circle began to open up and through the gap Tod saw a large witch swathed in a thick cloak of green, walking slowly toward her. She was flanked by two younger witches, on whom she leaned her not inconsiderable weight. Tod knew who this must be—Morwenna Mould, the Wendron Witch Mother.

Morwenna Mould stopped in front of the *Wiz* and looked down at Tod with an air of disappointment. “Is this it?” she said scornfully.

“It must be, Witch Mother,” one of her supporters ventured.

“It looks very . . . *young*.”

“It is quite new, I think, Witch Mother,” said the other supporter.

“It’s too new to know much,” Morwenna snapped. “I thought she was getting one of the older ones. He won’t like it.” Surprisingly light on her feet when she needed to be, Morwenna swiveled around to stare at the Circle. She raised her voice angrily. “Where is that Marissa girl, anyway?”

Her reply was a yell of surprise from the Circle. She turned, expecting to see the errant Marissa, and saw two small figures on an old wooden sled come bumping into the quarry. They were covered in snow.

Morwenna reacted quickly. “**Grasp** them!” she yelled.

Ferdie and Oskar were too chilled to react. The Witch Mother’s helpers leaped forward, grabbed a twin each and held their shoulders in a **Grasp**. The coven stared menacingly at Oskar and Ferdie. There had been a rumor that Snow Sprites had been sighted in the Forest, and many of the witches—including Morwenna—assumed they had now made a successful sprite snatch. It was, the coven thought, turning out to be a good day, however new and useless the Apprentice might be.

Tod saw the look in the witches’ eyes as they stared at Oskar and Ferdie and it frightened her. She stood up unsteadily and at once felt the weight of Morwenna’s heavy hand descend upon her shoulder. A moment later she too felt the iron chill of the witch’s **Grasp** leach into her bones and a feeling of fuzziness invade her mind, but Tod fought it, using a very basic **MindScreen** that Septimus had taught her.

Morwenna pointed at Oskar and Ferdie. “Take them to the cell cave,” she ordered.

There was a shocked silence among the coven. The two witches who had Ferdie and Oskar in their **Grasp** looked at each other in dismay. Their job was to advise the Witch Mother—and it was a dangerous one. Morwenna Mould in her declining years did not take kindly to advice. However, Morwenna also did not take kindly to witches who were too frightened to give advice. Being chosen as a Witch Mother Supporter was seen as a poisoned chalice. The two current Supporters, Bryony and Madron, were close friends—unusual among witches—and had agreed to always act together.

“Ahem. Witch Mother,” murmured Bryony.

“What?” snapped Morwenna.

“The, er, Snow Sprites,” said Madron.

“Yes? What about them?” asked Morwenna.

“It is usually considered safer . . .”

“With Snow Sprites . . .”

“Who always hold a grudge . . .”

“When captured . . .”

“Or confined . . .”

“In any way . . .”

“For Forest’s sake!” Morwenna Mould yelled. She flashed a look of exasperation that would have floored a witch acting on her own. “What are you trying to say, you mumbling idiots? Spit it out!”

Bryony and Madron glanced at each other, then they took a deep breath and said in unison, “Witch Mother. With respect. With captured Snow Sprites it is usually considered safer to . . . *kill them.*”

SNOW SPRITES

“They’re not Snow Sprites!” Tod yelled. “Let them go!”

Ferdie and Oskar, already numbed by the cold, were now falling into the trance-state that is an effect of a powerful **Grasp**. With Bryony’s and Madron’s hands lying heavy on their shoulders, they stood stone-still, their eyes unfocused.

The coven turned its stare on Tod. “They’re just covered in snow, that’s all,” she faltered.

“Of course they are covered in snow,” said Bryony, who had Ferdie in her **Grasp**. “Snow Sprites generally are.” A chorus of laughter greeted this.

“They’re not Snow Sprites, they’re my friends!” Tod yelled.

“Snow Sprites as friends, eh?” said Morwenna, whose hearing was not good. “Well, well. Maybe we underestimated you, Apprentice. Maybe you have a little more **Magyk** than it seems. Maybe you are not quite the mistake I took you to be. *Maybe* the sorcerer will be pleased to have you after all.” The Witch Mother smiled. “And I’ll have a few sprite bones to give him too, ha-ha. As long as we rake them out of the fire quickly.”

The shock of Morwenna’s words hit Tod like a blow: *Bones? Fire?* “Ferdie! Oskie!” she yelled. “Wake up!”

But neither Ferdie nor Oskar responded. Bryony and Madron grinned at each other. Their **Grasps** were clearly a lot more effective than that of the Witch Mother, and from Morwenna’s sour expression they guessed she knew it too.

Desperately, Tod struggled to get free, but every movement made Morwenna’s **Grasp** grow tighter and more painful. Soon Tod’s shoulder

hurt so much that she had no choice but to stay still. “You have learned your first lesson: do not fight the power of the Forest,” Morwenna hissed at her. “Now your sprites will learn theirs.”

“They are not sprites!” Tod screamed out. “They are human! Ferdie! Oskar! *Wake up!*”

But Ferdie and Oskar stared blankly into space.

“More wood for the fire!” Morwenna yelled.

In the center of the quarry floor a fire crackled and spat. Now the witches scattered to the margins of the quarry where fallen branches lay stacked and hurried to bring them to stoke the flames.

From the margins of the Forest above, two young witches watched the activity below. These were Jenna’s spies, Ariel and Star. They had just escorted their Queen safely to Galen’s treehouse and had been waiting for a chance to rejoin the coven without being spotted. The frenzied fire-stoking gave them the perfect opportunity. As the flames rose higher, they ran quickly down the rocky path that led down to the quarry floor. Ariel and Star slipped through the narrow gap in the rocks, picked up a branch, lugged it across to the fire and hurled it onto the flames. They grinned at each other in relief. No one had noticed.

As each witch added her fuel the flames rose higher, roaring up into the darkening sky. The heat was such that even though they were some distance from the fire, caked snow began to fall from Oskar and Ferdie and Tod at last began to feel warm. But the warmer Tod felt, the more scared she became. She watched her friends staring vacantly at the flames and she wondered if they had any idea what the witches intended to do. But most of all, she wondered how on earth she was going to stop the witches from doing it.

It wasn’t every day that two Snow Sprites got thrown onto the fire, and the coven now began to form an excited Witch Circle around the fire and its victims-to-be. Star and Ariel joined them, unsure what was happening but doing their best to look as though they knew.

Like the drone of a swarm of bees, a low, rhythmic humming began—the renowned Wendron Witch Circle **Hum**. Something about its steady, expectant rhythm made Tod feel very afraid. The **Hum**, however, had a different effect on the Witch Mother—it was something Morwenna had

noticed recently but had kept secret, for it was a sure sign of waning powers. It made her feel sleepy.

Tod became aware that the Witch Mother's **Grasp** had loosened. Her hand was now merely resting lightly on her shoulder. Tod longed to break away and run free, but she forced herself to stay where she was. If she ran now she would be leaving Oskar and Ferdie to their fate. She must stay calm and try to think. There *must* be something she could do . . . but what?

The flames leaped higher and the **Hum** began to morph into a chant:

Sprites burn bright!

Light the night!

Light the night!

Sprites burn bright!

The chant jolted the Witch Mother from her **Hum**-induced daze. Completely forgetting her **Grasp**, she raised her hands in the air and shouted, "Coven, stop! Though twilight is falling it is not yet night. We will wait until Mother Moon rises over the Guardian Ash." She smiled. "We shall have our sprite bones soon enough, fear not."

Above the quarry, through the bare boughs of the tallest tree—which Tod guessed to be the Guardian Ash—she saw the white gleam of a full moon. The **Hum** began once more, growing louder and faster as though to speed the moon upward and send her clear of its fine dark tracery of branches.

Star and Ariel looked at each other, aghast. The coven was about to burn two kids from the Castle. What would the Queen have to say about that? It would be good-bye to their free food at Wizard Sandwiches for sure. As the remorseless hum of the Witch Circle continued, Ariel slipped from the Circle and vanished into the shadows.

MARISSA IN THE GULLEY

Marissa stumbled along, muttering the rudest words she could think of—she had a fine collection and many to choose from. Marissa could not believe how fast things could go wrong. She had gone to all the trouble of fixing a very successful **OverRide** and getting the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice into the Forest only to have two stupid kids on a sled get in the way. As she had raced after the Apprentice she had tripped over a branch and lost her **FleetFoot** and now the sled was too far ahead for her to get to it before it got to the coven's quarry. The Witch Mother would have her fat claws on the Apprentice by now. She was in big trouble. Cursing her bad luck, Marissa hobbled along as fast as she could, a stitch nagging at her side, the cold air making her wheeze and her twisted ankle jabbing at her.

Marissa had not wanted to involve the Witch Mother in her Apprentice snatch, but Morwenna Mould had found out and insisted on being in on the deal. Marissa had had no choice but to agree to send Tod to the quarry. However, she had not intended for Tod to actually get there. She had planned to catch her up with her **FleetFoot** and divert her out of the gulley well before she reached the coven. Marissa figured that by the time the Witch Mother realized what had happened, she and Tod would be far away.

But now, Marissa thought bitterly, everything was ruined. Morwenna Mould had her prize and all the power the sorcerer had promised her would go to that pig of a Witch Mother. It was so *unfair*. Marissa stomped angrily along the gulley, but when she came to the gap through which she had planned to take Tod, she stopped. Maybe, she thought, all was not lost. She could still go to the midnight meeting with the sorcerer, she just wouldn't

have the Apprentice with her. But that didn't have to be a disaster. In fact, thought Marissa, things could turn out even better than she had planned.

Marissa smiled. She knew exactly what she would do. She would tell the sorcerer that she had been double-crossed. She would say that Morwenna Mould had kidnapped the Apprentice and planned to use her for her own benefit. She would fix it so that the sorcerer saw the Witch Mother as a dangerous adversary who must be vanquished at once. Marissa smiled. Yes, she could see it now . . . marching into the Winter Circle with the powerful sorcerer at her side . . . a quick **ThunderFlash** aimed at the Witch Mother . . . maybe a **Darke Dart** . . . or both. *Both*, thought Marissa. It served the old cow right. And when it had worked, when the fat old carcass of Morwenna Mould was lying on the ground having done all the nasty stuff it was ever going to do, then she, Marissa Janice Lane, would proclaim herself Witch Mother and that would be that. No one would dare oppose her with Oraton-Marr at her side. That would pay old Moldy Face back for all those nights she had spent scrubbing the burned wolverine stew off the bottom of the cooking pot. Marissa broke into a broad smile. She knew she could persuade the sorcerer to do as she wished—men usually did what she wanted.

Marissa slipped through a gap in the rock hidden by snow-covered ivy and in seconds was hurrying along the steep footpath that would take her around the top of the quarry and on the long journey to her meeting with the sorcerer. She wrapped her witch cloak around her for protection, trusting that she would not meet a pack of wolverines. That, thought Marissa, would be just her luck.

THE QUEEN'S SPY

As the moon moved slowly up through the outer tracery of the top of the Guardian Ash, Jenna was climbing the ladder to Galen's treehouse, watched by the bright yellow eyes of a tiger hidden in the undergrowth. Jenna had released Jim Knee and told him to return to the Castle, but on principle the jinnee did not obey the command at once. He liked to retain the illusion of free will. And besides, though he would not admit it to himself, he wanted to see the Queen safely up in the treehouse, away from the nighttime danger that always lurked on the Forest floor.

Galen's treehouse was a complex affair consisting of many platforms, pods, linking ladders and ropes spread across three ancient oaks. As Jenna stopped on the first landing and reached up to pull a vine to signal her arrival, she heard a sharp hiss from the Forest floor. She looked down to see Ariel's anxious face looking up at her.

"Queen Jenna," Ariel said, all in a rush, "you have to come! Something awful is going to happen in the Witch Circle."

Jenna had little interest in what was happening in the Witch Circle and absolutely no wish to go back into the nighttime Forest. From what she had heard from Ariel and Star in the past few months, she understood that awful things often happened in the Circle. The less she knew about them, the better, Jenna thought. "It's none of my business," she said briskly, and went to pull the vine.

"But it *is* your business," Ariel insisted. "They're going to burn two Castle kids."

Jenna's hand froze in midair. "*What?*" she whispered.

“Please, Queen Jenna,” said Ariel. “Come *now*. There isn’t much time.”

THE MOON OVER THE ASH

The moon broke free from the last tracery of the Guardian Ash. All witches' eyes were upon the Snow Sprites, who, now that all their snow had melted, looked worryingly like real children. But not one of the witches said a word—some because they dared not and many because they didn't care. They were having a great night, so why spoil it?

Star glanced anxiously up at the small gap in the trees where the path ran down to the quarry, but she saw nothing. Around her the sprite chant grew ever louder:

Sprites burn bright!

Light the night!

Light the night!

Sprites burn bright!

Tod had managed to sneak a **Charm** from her Apprentice belt and she was now clasping a tiny silver snail shell. This was for an **UnSeen** that gave her the highest protection possible from harm—and Tod reckoned she needed all the protection she could get. Silently, she began the **Incantation** and to her relief, Morwenna—despite her heavy hand resting on Tod's shoulder—did not notice, for Tod's substance was unchanged. Many of the witches saw the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice slowly disappear, but not one dared mention it. Some actually felt relieved—at least one of the children might survive the night.

Ferdie and Oskar, still under the fearsome **Grasps** of Bryony and Madron, were mercifully unaware of what was in store. As the two witches slowly walked Ferdie and Oskar toward the fire, Tod carefully lifted Morwenna's hand from her shoulder and stepped out of her reach. The Witch Mother, enthralled by the chant and the sheer excitement of the moment, did not notice.

As Bryony and Madron propelled Ferdie and Oskar nearer to the flames, within her **UnSeen**, Tod was so close that she could have reached out and touched them. The chanting was drawing toward a crescendo and Tod knew there would come a moment when the two witches must release Oskar and Ferdie from their **Grasps** in order to hurl them into the flames, and at that point she would have to act with lightning speed. Stealthily as Jim Knee himself, Tod padded beside Oskar and Ferdie, matching them step for step, waiting to pounce.

All eyes in the quarry were on the witches and their victims as they creeped ever closer toward the fire. Tod's gaze did not leave Ferdie and Oskar for one second. By now they were so close to the fire that the heat was searing. Tod braced herself. *Any moment now*, she told herself. *Any . . . moment . . .*

It happened fast. In a sudden, synchronized movement, Bryony and Madron released their **Grasps**.

Ferdie and Oskar saw the flames. They screamed.

Tod pounced. She pulled them back from the fire, yelling, "It's me, Tod! Run! Run!" Bryony and Madron lunged at them, **Grasping** hands outstretched, but Ferdie and Oskar were racing away, with Tod's voice behind them shouting, "Run! Run!"

But they were not free yet. The Witch Circle had closed ranks. The Tribe of Three were now surrounded by a steely necklace of blue witchy eyes.

"*Rush them!*" yelled Tod.

The Witch Circle joined arms like a chain-link fence and began a strangely pulsing **Hum**: *thrummer-thrum-thrum, thrummer-thrum-thrum*, spinning a web around them, making them dizzy. Ferdie and Oskar stopped at the witch fence, bewildered, like sheep reaching the boundary of their pen. They turned to Tod just in time to see her **UnSeen** slowly leave her.

Morwenna Mould's deep laugh cut through the **Hum**. "Ha! I see the Sprites have some spirit!" she said. "And I see the Apprentice has too. Well, well, let us have some fun with them, let us see them *really* run." The Witch Mother walked over to the fire and drew out a burning branch. "They will run fast with this behind them!"

A brave, lone shout came from the Circle. "Witch Mother! The Apprentice is meant for the sorcerer!"

"And he can have her—when we are done with her—and some nice, toasty sprite bones as an extra gift."

With the burning branch in her hand, the Witch Mother walked very slowly toward Tod, Oskar and Ferdie, enjoying her power.

"I'm sorry," Tod said.

"What for?" asked Ferdie.

"Because I should do something. But I don't know what."

"Scream?" Ferdie suggested.

And so they did—all three together.

The Witch Circle laughed and screamed back. Once again, the **Scream** of the Wendron Witch coven rang throughout the Forest.

THE TIGER, THE WITCH AND THE RED ROBE

Jenna, Jim Knee and Ariel were heading for the path that led down to the quarry, when the **Scream** began. It drifted up, eerie and piercing, and caused a fluttering of night owls rising from the trees in panic. Ariel's hearing was acute, she had already heard the brief screams of Ferdie, Oskar and Tod and she suspected that the witch **Scream** was being used to cover up the sound of genuine screams, which did sometimes upset the more sensitive witches. Ariel feared it would all be over by the time they arrived at the Circle, but she dared not tell Jenna that.

Ariel glanced around to check that the Queen and her tiger were still following. Jenna saw the fear in the young witch's eyes and felt sick. The path wound endlessly ahead and she knew that at the end of it they had to scramble down the steep, rocky path into the quarry. There was no time left.

"Ariel, stop!" Jenna called.

Ariel swung around and looked at the Queen. So she, too, knew it was all over. "I . . . I am so, so sorry—" Ariel began, but Jenna cut her off.

"I shall send my jinnee," she said.

Ariel looked blank.

"The tiger. He's a jinnee."

Ariel's eyes widened in surprise. This Queen was worth keeping on the right side of. "Oh," she said. "Yes, I knew that."

"You know the way. Show him. You will be faster than I. If the Castle kids need any help you must give it. And I don't care what you have to do, okay?"

Ariel nodded.

Jenna kneeled down beside the tiger and searched for a hint of understanding in its yellow eyes. She saw none, but she knew she must assume the best. “Jim Knee,” Jenna said. “I command you to follow Ariel with all speed. She will show you the way to the Witch’s Quarry. Go as fast as you can. You will find Castle children there. I command you to bring them to me safe and well.” Jenna stood up. “Go!”

Jenna watched the tiger bounding after the young witch, who glanced behind her and looked, not surprisingly, a little anxious.

Tod, Ferdie and Oskar had linked arms and were facing the witches. Like an ever-tightening noose, the Witch Circle was closing in, pushing the Tribe of Three back toward the flames. The hypnotic pulse of the **Hum** made each step toward the heat of the fire feel oddly unreal.

Suddenly the voice of Morwenna hissed in Tod’s ear, sharp against the blur of the **Hum**. “You’re a little fool,” she said. “You should know better than to ally yourself to two sprites. If it wasn’t for the sorcerer I would throw you in as well.” Tod looked up and saw a flicker of enjoyment cross the Witch Mother’s face, and she understood that the witches were playing with them in the way a cat plays with a mouse. A wave of anger replaced the fear and Tod swung around and landed a wild punch somewhere in the middle of the vast softness beneath Morwenna’s thick green cloak. Morwenna reeled backward, the **Hum** turned to a gasp and the two nearest witches broke the circle to catch their Witch Mother before she fell to the ground. They were a fraction too late and Morwenna’s bulk brought them crashing down with her.

The Circle was broken and with it the power it was casting over the witches. Many began to realize the enormity of what they had been about to do. Some hugged each other in dismay and others stood with their hands over their faces, staring at the fire through their fingers.

As Tod, Ferdie and Oskar made a dash for the break in the circle, Morwenna Mould’s voice echoed around the quarry: “Stop them! Stop them!” But no one rushed to obey. The three reached the gap and as two of the older witches made a halfhearted move to grab them, a tiger leaped out of nowhere. It stood snarling, its teeth bared, its yellow eyes glittering in the light of the fire, daring anyone to move.

Under the shocked gaze of the Wendron Witch Coven, the tiger escorted the two Snow Sprites and the Apprentice away from the circle. Not one witch raised so much as a finger. Even when a cry of “I said stop them, you fools!” came from their beached Witch Mother, no one moved. Silently the broken Witch Circle watched the tiger escort their three ex-captives across the quarry floor. They had just reached the gap in the rock where the path led up to the Forest when the Apprentice turned and ran back. The two Snow Sprites tried to stop her but she ignored them.

The witches shrank back. What **Darke Magyk** was the Apprentice about to visit upon them? Even the Witch Mother, who was now back on her feet and propped up by Bryony and Madron, did no more than watch warily. But all the Apprentice did was pick up the ropes of the two sleds, then turn and walk away, pulling the sleds behind her.

As she headed toward the waiting tiger that was guarding her friends, Tod felt the hairs prickle on the back of her neck—she was being followed. Tod had a small **Celebrate Charm** in her Apprentice belt. Septimus had given it to her that morning. It was, he had insisted, to be used only if she won the race. But Tod hoped Septimus would understand her disobedience. Suddenly, she swung around to face the Coven. It was just like Grandmother’s Footsteps. The witches who had been rapidly creeping up behind her froze. With one fluid movement, Tod took the **Charm** from her belt and threw it up into the air, calling out the **Incantation** as she did so: *“To the Victor, the Spoils!”*

The **Charm** exploded into sparks, prickling and crackling red and green in the night air. It was beautiful, but to the witches, who had no idea what it was, it was terrifying. Overexcited by too much **Screaming** and the prospect of a sprite-burning, the witches scattered with shrieks of fear.

Morwenna Mould knew she was defeated. Left virtually alone in the Quarry—apart from Bryony, Madron and a few of the older witches too creaky to run very fast, the Witch Mother watched her prey disappear into the gap between the rocks where the path led up into the Forest. Even if she had wanted to, there was no way Morwenna could follow them—she could no longer fit.

Morwenna spat on the ground in disgust. She was sure she knew who was behind this—the double-crossing, two-timing little trollop Marissa. Marissa would be sorry, she would make sure of that. And then, as

Morwenna Mould stood fuming, a flash of gold in the trees at the top of the path caught her eye. She looked up and saw the distinctive red of the cloak of the Castle Queen, A surge of fury ran through her.

“Queen Jenna!” the Witch Mother yelled, her deep voice echoing around the quarry. “You will regret this. When you have a daughter I will come for her. You will never have a moment’s peace. Never!”

Jenna looked down at the furious figure below, its squat shape silhouetted against the firelight. “You take on a Castle Queen at your peril, Morwenna Mould,” she muttered. Then, with the tiger at her side and her two witches on guard behind her, Jenna led Tod, Ferdie and Oskar through the nighttime Forest to the safety of Galen’s treehouse.



PART VIII

THIRTY-FOUR HOURS TO HATCHING

GALEN'S TREEHOUSE

Many years ago Galen had taught the teenage Sarah Heap all that she knew about herbs and healing. Now Galen was elderly and frail and living an increasingly precarious life in her Forest treehouse. Sarah Heap worried about her much-loved old mentor and had decided to spend the winter looking after her, which was why Silas Heap, unwilling to let his wife brave the Forest on her own, had found himself spending an uncomfortable and boring winter up a tree eating what he described as “rabbit food.”

But that evening Silas was—as Sarah pointed out—smiling for a change. He had his daughter with him (who had arrived with two very pretty young witches) and he had just learned the wonderful news that his son Sam was back home. Both Silas and Sarah had feared they would never see Sam again. Even though Silas could tell from Jenna’s careful answers to Sarah’s questions that Sam had been injured, he had great faith in the talents of Dandra Draa and her Sick Bay team. Just to know for the first time in four long years where Sam actually was that night was a tremendous relief to Silas. The icing on the cake was that tomorrow he and Sarah had a perfectly acceptable excuse to leave this cold, nut-strewn, shrew-infested treehouse and return to civilization. Even the shirt woven from smelly, unbelievably scratchy goat hair that Galen had given him for a MidWinter Feast Day present (and that Sarah made him wear so as not to hurt Galen’s feelings) no longer itched quite so badly that night.

The largest group that the treehouse had played host to for some time was gathered around the fire basket, which was suspended above a circular hole in the middle of an open platform. Silas, Sarah, Galen, Jenna, Ariel, Star, Tod, Ferdie, Oskar and a yellow-eyed tiger were sitting on rugs strewn over the rough wooden planks. Silas threw another log on the fire and tongues of flame leaped up into the branches above.

“Careful, Silas!” Sarah shouted. “You’ll burn us to the ground!”

Silas threw a bucket of water on the flames and watched the glowing cinders drop through the fire basket to a huge pile of ash on the Forest floor far below. Then he took some skewers of meat from the outer embers of the fire and offered it to their guests. Galen pulled a face at the sight of what she called “flesh.”

“Anyone for roast squirrel?” Silas inquired cheerily.

Everyone, apart from Galen and a loyal Sarah, was very much for roast squirrel. Tod, Ferdie and Oskar were ravenous. Jim Knee—who Jenna had decided to keep as protection—eyed the tiny pieces of meat with disdain and slunk away. There was good hunting to be had in the Forest, he could smell it.

Tod gazed up into the dark tracery of branches above. She saw the moon riding high in the star-filled sky and a shiver ran through her as she remembered the last time she had looked at the moon through the trees. She glanced at Ferdie and Oskar, who were sitting wrapped in blankets, quietly talking to each other. Tod figured that they still didn’t totally understand what had so very nearly happened to them. Which was, Tod thought, for the best.

At the end of supper Ariel and Star reluctantly got to their feet. “We must go now,” they said.

“Oh, *must* you?” Silas said, sounding very disappointed.

“You heard what they said, Silas,” Sarah snapped.

Ariel smiled at Silas. She liked his mischievous blue eyes. “We are sorry to leave you, Silas Heap. But it would not be good for us to be absent tonight.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” said Sarah.

Jenna helped Ariel and Star drop the ladder down and handed them an extra gold coin each for their night’s work. As they went she gave them a message for Septimus, telling him she, Tod, Oskar and Ferdie would be back the next morning. Jenna watched her witch spies descend the ladder, pleased with them and their night’s work. She was still shocked by what had so very nearly happened. How right she had been to keep a close watch on the Wendrons, she thought. If she had not . . . Jenna shook her head to clear the thought from her mind. It did not bear thinking about.

THE WITCHFINDER

Jenna returned to the fireside to see Galen taking a small brass tube from one of her many leafy pockets and handing it to Sarah, saying excitedly, “You must see how well your wonderful gift works. It really is a genuine **WitchFinder**.”

Sarah took the tube and went to the edge of the platform where she put it to her eye like a telescope. Galen, slower on her feet, joined her. “Oh!” Sarah gasped under her breath. “I can see them both. Look, there’s Ariel running . . . and Star just behind her. They blend into the night so well. You could never see them without this. Never. And did you know it shows their footprints, too?”

Galen smiled. “There’s no hiding place for witches with a **WitchFinder**,” she murmured.

“It’s amazing,” Sarah breathed. “I can see them all the way through the trees. Their cloaks kind of glow and the trees almost disappear.” She turned to Galen. “I’m so glad it works. You can never be sure when you buy at the Port **Magyk** Market.”

“I knew it worked when I caught sight of Morwenna a few nights ago,” Galen said, smiling.

“You don’t need a fancy gadget to see Morwenna,” Silas commented, joining them. “She’s what you might call obvious.”

“Silas, you are so rude!” Sarah sounded rather pleased. There had been a time—many years ago now—when Silas had thought Morwenna Mould rather wonderful. And Morwenna had felt much the same about Silas. But those times were long past, as was the truce that had then existed between

the Wendrons and the Castle. Sarah gave the **WitchFinder** back to Galen. “Galen, I do wish you would come back to the Castle with us,” she said. “It feels so much more dangerous than when I lived here.”

“Times change, Sarah dear. That was nearly thirty years ago.”

“Exactly,” Sarah said. “And you are not getting any younger.”

This did not go down well with Galen. “Be that as it may, Sarah Heap, I belong in the Forest and this is where I intend to stay. I will *not* be hounded out by a coven going to the bad.” Feeling that she had been a little harsh with Sarah, Galen added, “Anyway, dear, thanks to your **WitchFinder** I shall be well prepared for any trouble.”

The rest of the evening passed happily. It reminded Tod of the beach fire gatherings she, Oskar and Ferdie used to have at home in their PathFinder village. It ended in much the same way too, with people telling increasingly scary ghost stories while the moon sank slowly, the night air began to bite and everyone’s thoughts turned to how much warmer it would be in bed.

The accommodation in the treehouse consisted of a collection of pods made from woven willow branches bent into spheres and covered with fir fronds. They perched like huge nests high in the canopy of the three tall oaks and were connected by rope walkways and precarious arrangements of ladders and planks. Galen roosted like a large scruffy hen in a tiny pod precariously placed at the top of the middle, tallest oak. Silas and Sarah had one of the pods nearest the platform because Silas did not enjoy balancing along the ropewalks.

Galen now set about settling her guests for the night. She gave Jenna her own pod next to Silas and Sarah. Tod, Ferdie and Oskar, to their delight, were directed to a large pod high up in an outer oak, with its own platform and private ladder to the Forest floor.

The pod had a circular opening over which hung three wolverine skins. Inside it was knee-deep in dry leaves and moss on which was placed a neat pile of yet more wolverine skins and some brightly colored blankets that smelled of goat. The pod felt warm and safe, as indeed it was. Galen took care that the outer branches of her three oaks never touched those of any other tree. Any creature that wished to invade the treehouse—right down to the smallest leaf leeches and tree shrews—must ascend the trunks and get past the rings of fiendishly sticky bark glue, which Galen had painted

around her trees. And so Tod, Oskar and Ferdie had the luxury of being in the middle of the nighttime Forest while feeling perfectly secure.

Drained by the events of the day, Ferdie and Oskar wrapped themselves in the goat blankets, curled up in the soft, springy leaves and fell asleep at once. But Tod was not tired at all. Despite the terrifying experiences of the Witch Circle she was excited to be out in the Forest and away from the urban feel of the Castle. She sat in the entrance of the pod, looking out and thinking how good it was to be free from the rules and regulations of the Wizard Tower and back in the middle of nature once more. The fresh smell of the air, free from the damp moldiness of the Forest floor, made her feel wide-awake. Perching in the canopy of the Forest felt not unlike being out at sea. The swaying of the topmost branches in the breeze felt like the rocking motion of a small boat and set Tod wondering what her father, Dan Moon, was doing that very moment. Was he out on a night fishing expedition watching the sky just as she was? Was he thinking of her right then, just as she was thinking of him? Tod longed to show Dan all she was doing and she hoped that one day soon, when all was safe from Oraton-Marr, he would be able to come through the Ancient Ways to the Castle once again.

Thinking of the sea reminded Tod that Galen had loaned her the **WitchFinder** for the night. “Keep a lookout for Morwenna Mould,” she had said. “She’s up to something, mark my words.” Tod put the **WitchFinder** to her eye like a telescope and began to **Watch** the Forest.

It was strange seeing the Forest through the **WitchFinder**. The trees became quite insubstantial: their thick, dark trunks looked pale and gave the appearance of being almost transparent. In contrast Tod saw that the animals—and what a wonderful variety there was—were sharply defined, and seemed almost ultra real, as though someone had carefully drawn around them with a thick black pen. It was fascinating. Tod spent a happy ten minutes **Watching** a family of tree shrews fight over a supper of a large leaf leech and then, having dropped most of the creature onto the Forest floor, settle into their nest with much fussing and petulant nipping.

Slowly, Tod grew sleepy. She was about to reluctantly put the **WitchFinder** away when a faint green glow appeared on the edge of her circle of vision. Tod held her breath with excitement—*it was a witch*. She was coming along the path and she was heading this way. Remembering

how Galen had twisted the thick brass cuff of the **WitchFinder** to get a close-up view, Tod did the same and found she was looking straight into the bright blue eyes of Marissa. She almost dropped the little brass tube in shock and was about to pull down the wolverine skin door flaps when she remembered that there was no way Marissa could see her. Tod was safely hidden in a pod at the top of the tree and was hundreds of yards away, which was way too far for even the most skillful of witches to **Feel** that she was being watched.

Fascinated, Tod **Watched** Marissa wind her way along the Forest path, the **WitchFinder** picking out the witch's cloak and making it glow a bright greenish yellow. Marissa was hurrying along the path, glancing over her shoulder every now and then, and it seemed to Tod that the witch feared she was being followed. Marissa was up to something, of that there was no doubt.

Soon Marissa was below, rushing past the broad foot of the first of Galen's great oaks. The witch glanced upward and Tod held her breath, even though she was pretty sure that Marissa was more worried about being seen than seeing, for the witch pulled the hood of her cloak up and shrank into it as she hurried by.

Marissa hurried on through the trees and Tod was impressed by how silently she traveled. Sound from the Forest floor traveled easily upward, yet she heard not the faintest whisper of a footfall. As Marissa drew away and ever more trees obscured the view, the bright glow of her cloak in the **WitchFinder** eyeglass began to grow dull, and Tod had to concentrate hard to follow the witch. After some minutes Marissa was no more than an occasional vague glimmer—and then she was gone.

Tod was sure that Marissa was up to something. She remembered the Witch Mother's comments about the sorcerer and the deal she had with Marissa. Tod had the strangest feeling that the sorcerer might be Oraton-Marr and if that was the case, then here was another link to the Egg of the Orm.

Tod made a sudden decision. She knew she was being foolhardy, but she didn't care. She shoved the **WitchFinder** into her deepest pocket, pulled a wolverine skin around her for warmth, then dropped the emergency rope down. She felt the weighted end hit the ground, then with the practiced movements of one used to climbing up masts and the sides of tall houses to

hang nets, Tod was down the rope in seconds, before she had time to talk herself out of what she was doing. She stood for a few moments on the Forest floor and looked up at the treehouse complex, seeing the friendly glow from the embers of the fire. Tod felt a brief flicker of fear and pushed it aside. She had a witch to follow. And fast.

IN THE NIGHTTIME FOREST

Tod pointed the **WitchFinder** at the ground. She told herself that if it did not find Marissa's footprints she would climb straight back up the rope and forget the whole thing. Tod was not sure whether she was entirely pleased when a glowing outline of a foot sprang into the **WitchFinder** eyepiece. Not more than eighteen inches in front of that print was another, then another. Left, right, left, right. There was no excuse now—before her lay a clear trail.

Heart beating fast, Tod set off. She had learned from Oskar how to travel silently through a forest but she was not as skilled as he, and every time a twig snapped under her foot her heart jumped in fear. Her way was clear at first because Marissa had followed a well-worn path, but soon Tod came to a large, round rock where the path continued but Marissa's footprints did not. Tod stepped off the path into the mulch of thousands of years' leaf fall, across which Marissa's footprints glowed like a line of beacons. In the deep softness, Tod's footfalls were silent, and she soon became aware that all around her was silence too. A feeling of awe crept over her; she felt as though she was walking through a very ancient space.

Tod was now approaching a close-knit line of trees that presented a solid wall of trunks and branches. She stopped in front of two extremely tall, straight trees that stood remarkably close together, like sentinels. Marissa's footprints passed between them and Tod knew she must do the same, but her way was barred. Two great boughs were growing across her path, and a tangle of smaller branches formed a tightly woven net. Tod

wondered how Marissa had managed to slip through—it did not seem possible.

Unable to rid herself of the feeling that the trees were staring down at her, Tod looked up at them. “Please,” she whispered. “Please let me pass.” In the tops of branches Tod could hear a rustling that spread far in front of her, as though the trees were talking to one another. “It’s really important,” Tod said. And then it came into her mind to say, “I mean only good for the Forest.”

The rustling above increased as though a strong wind was blowing through the treetops, and Tod began to feel scared—something very eerie was happening. Suddenly she felt very alone and exposed. What was she *doing*, following a witch deep into the nighttime Forest? Was she totally crazy? Tod’s certainty left her. All she wanted to do was to get back to the treehouse. Fast.

As she turned to run, a movement of the two sentinel trees caught her eye and Tod stopped in amazement: *the great boughs blocking her way were beginning to rise*. To see a tree moving was awe-inspiring. As the arms of the trees lifted, Tod saw those of the pair of trees behind beginning to do the same and she knew she must go on. She stepped between the first two trees and moved slowly forward down the avenue of towering trees. Ahead of her she saw the rising branches rippling like a long wave. As she moved down the long, straight avenue she became aware that the branches were lowering behind her. There was no turning back now. A sense of awe stole over Tod as she followed Marissa’s glowing footprints through the trees. She understood that she had been allowed to enter a very private space. She was not sure why, but she did remember Galen saying that the Forest had its way of knowing what was good for it.

Tod had been prepared for something magnificent at the end of the avenue—some kind of tree temple, maybe. But as she stepped beneath the last of the raised boughs she found herself in a small clearing in which there were what appeared to be three large and unruly heaps of wood partly covered with turf, each with a ramshackle door in it. They looked, Tod thought, like the kind of camps she, Ferdie and Oskar used to build on the edge of their own forest, the Far, back at home. They certainly did not look like anything special. And where was Marissa? Tod put the **WitchFinder** to her eye and saw the witch’s footprints leading to the middle heap. Puzzled,

Tod stared at the ramshackle door and the random piling of the log and branches. Was this where Marissa lived? She supposed it must be. A wave of weariness came over Tod. She had been so sure that Marissa was up to something important. Now it seemed that all she had done was risk the dangers of the nighttime Forest just to follow Marissa back to her scruffy dump of a home. How stupid was that?

Tod watched the door for some minutes but the little hut was silent. Marissa was clearly already fast asleep. Feeling very foolish and not just a little scared at the thought of the journey through the Forest back to the treehouse, Tod turned to go. The first pair of tall trees stood before her, impassive. Their branches hung low, the two huge boughs barring the path back along the avenue, their twigs intertwined in a tangled net. "Please . . . let me pass," Tod whispered, spooked by the sound of her voice in the deep silence of the clearing. But the boughs did not move. Tod tried not to panic; she told herself that she had had to wait a few minutes for them to move before. And so she stood there, waiting patiently, but nothing happened. "Please," she whispered. "Please let me pass . . ."

It was then that Tod heard behind her the creak of a door opening. She swung around to see Marissa gingerly stepping out. In the shadow of the sentinel trees, Tod froze. Marissa had yet to see her; the witch was looking back over her shoulder and speaking to someone. Her voice sounded strained. And then Marissa was out and stepping aside to let whoever was in the little hut come out too. How two people had fit, Tod had no idea. The hut was tiny.

Marissa cast her witchy glance over the clearing, searching for danger—and saw Tod. The witch's blue eyes lit up so bright that they seemed to glow inside her head. "Stay right there," she said to Tod in a low, urgent voice. "Do not move. Do not say a word. It will be all right, I promise."

Tod stared at Marissa. She knew enough about the witch not to trust any of her promises. She glanced behind her but the boughs with their twisted network of twigs were as impenetrable as ever. Tod had no choice but to stay where she was anyway.

Marissa was now helping someone out of the hut and as the figure stepped into the clearing Tod could not suppress a gasp. There was no mistaking the close-cropped steel-gray hair and the deep-set, dark green eyes. It was the sorcerer, Oraton-Marr.

Marissa shepherded Oraton-Marr—resplendent in blue silks—into the clearing. “It seems,” she said, “that my threats have worked. The Witch Mother has thought better of her double-crossing plot. See, she has left the Apprentice here for you. As I suspected she would.”

The sorcerer eyed Marissa suspiciously. “You never said you suspected that,” he said. “You told me she had the Apprentice captive and wanted to do a deal with me. And I told you—”

“That you do not do deals with witches,” Marissa finished for him. “And why should you, Your Highness, when the very mention of your name clearly strikes fear into their hearts?”

“Quite,” Oraton-Marr replied. His eyes narrowed as he stared at Tod, half hidden in the shadows. “But she’s just a child. She’ll know nothing of any use.”

“This is the *ExtraOrdinary* Apprentice, Your Highness,” Marissa said. “I assure you, she knows a great deal.”

Oraton-Marr did not look convinced. “It’s a start, I suppose,” he said. “Bring the Apprentice to me. The deal was that you handed her to me, remember. So do it. Hand her over.”

“Oh . . . yes. I’ll go and fetch her.”

Marissa set off toward Tod, then she suddenly stopped dead and said a very rude, unwitchy word. *Tod had disappeared*. Marissa stared at the spot where Tod had been standing only a few seconds earlier and began to creep toward it as if somehow hoping to surprise her. Tod, amazed that her panicked **UnSeen** had actually worked, stepped to one side. But she had not fooled Oraton-Marr.

“She’s over there, you idiot!” he yelled at Marissa, his harsh voice cutting through the soft silence of the clearing.

“Where?” Marissa darted desperately from side to side, flailing her arms like a windmill in a vain attempt to grab hold of Tod. It would have been funny if Tod had not been so terrified.

While Tod moved slowly enough not to make a sound, but fast enough to keep out of Marissa’s clutches, she became aware of two more figures emerging from the hut. How many more could it hold? And what was Marissa doing with them all? The first to emerge was another one she recognized: Drone, Oraton-Marr’s servant. And struggling in his grasp was a small girl.

“Kaznim!” Tod breathed—and Marissa heard her.

After that everything happened so fast that later Tod could never remember exactly how it all came together. But it did. The sequence of events went something like this:

Marissa grabbed hold of Tod.

Tod kicked Marissa.

Marissa let go of Tod and yelled.

Tod’s **UnSeen** evaporated.

“Get her!” Oraton-Marr yelled to Drone.

Drone let go of Kaznim and set off across to Tod.

Marissa screamed.

Kaznim, now free, pulled a stick from the hut and swung it at Oraton-Marr’s feet.

Oraton-Marr fell over.

Drone lunged at Tod.

Marissa screamed.

Tod kicked Drone.

Drone fell over.

Kaznim jumped on him.

Marissa screamed, “Wolverines!”

At the edge of the clearing Tod saw the yellow eyes of a pack of wolverines. “Please!” she yelled at the sentinel trees. “Please let me pass!”

But Tod had no need to shout. In front of her the avenue was once again opening up. As Tod hurried forward she saw Drone try to grab Kaznim, so she grabbed her first. And as Tod and Kaznim made their escape, the avenue unfolded before them like a wave of green. Holding tightly on to Kaznim’s hand, Tod pulled the girl along with her, scrambling beneath the rising boughs. Behind them she was aware of the boughs dropping to the ground unusually fast, like a portcullis guarding a castle. As Tod and Kaznim ran along the avenue they heard the screams of Marissa, the yelling of Drone and the curses of Oraton-Marr grow ever fainter until they faded away. At the last pair of sentinel trees, Tod stopped and watched the boughs slowly come to rest. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for saving us.”

Kaznim stared at Tod, totally confused. The Apprentice girl who had chased her with a tiger had just saved her from the evil sorcerer and now she was talking to trees. Kaznim noticed that Tod no longer had hold of her

hand—she was free to run away if she wanted to. But Kaznim did not want to. Something told her that the Apprentice girl did not mean her any harm, and so Kaznim stood patiently beside Tod watching the last two great boughs settle back into their sentinel position. As the trees relaxed, they gave a satisfied groan, knowing they had done right by the Forest.

FOREST STRANGER

In the depths of the Big Freeze, when the winter mornings were dark and cold, the Forest slept late. And so it was in the treehouse. As the pale light from the sun crept around the wolverine-skin door flaps of the pods, their occupants all felt that it was much more sensible to stay curled up beneath piles of furs and goat blankets.

Galen was the first to emerge from her pod. Silently she set about making goat milk oatmeal laced with honey and setting the water on to brew Forest coffee, which Galen made from dried acorns—although Silas Heap was convinced that she actually used dried goat dung. The pleasant smell of the oatmeal drifted up through the trees, wandered into the top pod and woke Ferdie from a deep, leafy sleep. Slowly, Ferdie opened her eyes and remembered where she was. The soft morning light filled the pod with shifting shadows and Ferdie's gaze wandered around the cocoon in which she had spent the night. She loved the pod. It felt safe and yet exciting at the same time. As her eyes became used to the dim light, Ferdie counted her companions: there were three sleeping, breathing bumps of blankets.

Three?

Ferdie sat up fast. Who else was with them? A host of ghostly tales from the previous night flooded into her mind. Was it a witch child? A tree spirit? Or maybe even a were-wolverine, creeping into Forest beds at night and eating its bedfellows at the dawn of the new day. An awful thought occurred to Ferdie. Maybe *all three* bumps beneath the blankets were were-wolverines. Maybe they had already eaten Tod and Oskie and were now

waiting for her to wake up. In fact, maybe they had already eaten *everyone in the entire treehouse*.

Ferdie, still jittery after the Witch Circle, panicked. “*Aaaargh!*” she yelled.

Three figures leaped up. Not one of them was a were-wolverine.

“Oh,” Ferdie said, somewhat embarrassed. “Sorry. I thought . . .” Her voice trailed off. What she had thought seemed so stupid now. She looked at the young girl with the dark curly hair and wide-open eyes, and tried to remember seeing her the night before. She was sure she hadn’t. And from Oskar’s expression, he hadn’t seen the girl either.

“This is Kaznim,” Tod said. “I was looking for her in the Castle. Remember?”

“You found her *here?*” Ferdie asked, puzzled.

“Well, not here in the pod, exactly,” Tod said evasively.

“So *where*, exactly?” asked Oskar, who always knew when Tod had something to hide.

“Um. Well, somewhere really weird. In the Forest.”

Ferdie and Oskar stared at Tod. “You’ve been into the Forest? While we were asleep?” asked Ferdie.

“Um. Yes,” Tod admitted.

“Well, you might have taken *me*,” Oskar said. “You know I wanted to explore.”

“Like Ferdie said, you were asleep,” Tod said. “Anyway, it was an emergency.”

Ferdie and Oskar looked unimpressed. “What about the Tribe of Three?” they both said.

“I know, I know,” Tod protested. “But you were *asleep*. Snoring, in fact. Okay?”

“Okay,” Ferdie and Oskar said reluctantly.

“Well, tell us then,” Ferdie instructed.

And so, while they all sat wrapped in blankets and furs and the warmth of their breath misted the chill morning air, Tod told them about her time in the Nighttime Forest.

As she drew to a close, Oskar and Ferdie looked dumbstruck. “*Oraton-Marr?*” they exclaimed.

“Yes,” Tod said. “It was him.” She turned to Kaznim, who had listened silently to the conversation so far. “Could you tell my friends what you told me last night?”

“She understands what we say?” Oskar sounded surprised.

“I am not an animal,” Kaznim told Oskar crossly. “Of course I understand what you say.”

“I’m—sorry,” Oskar stammered, embarrassed. “I . . . I thought you might speak another language.”

“I am a Draa,” Kaznim said proudly. “Kaznim Na-Draa. Draa speak many tongues.”

Ferdie smiled at Kaznim. “Hello, I’m Ferdie.”

Kaznim smiled uncertainly.

“And this is my twin brother, Oskar.”

“Sorry if I was rude,” Oskar said. “I didn’t mean to be.”

Ferdie continued, “I was helping Tod to look for you in the Castle yesterday. We couldn’t find you anywhere. You just vanished.”

Kaznim looked at Tod. “Your tiger was chasing me,” she said accusingly. Tod laughed and Kaznim looked offended. “It was not funny,” she muttered.

Tod hurried to explain. “I wasn’t laughing at you, honestly. But the tiger wasn’t a real one. It was a jinnee. Called Jim Knee.”

Kaznim looked at Tod in awe. “You have your own jinnee?”

Tod shook her head. “He’s not mine. He was helping me, that’s all.”

Kaznim was still impressed. To have a jinnee helping you was a sign of great power.

“I’m sorry he frightened you,” Tod said. “He didn’t mean to. He’s nice, really.” She paused and then said, “So . . . where did you go?”

Kaznim took out her precious blue piece of paper. “Here. To this funny little shop with the long name.”

“It is a funny shop,” Ferdie agreed. “I go there to see Oskie. He helps out downstairs.”

Kaznim nodded. “Yes. I saw him there. He had insect eyes.”

Oskar grinned. “I did. And I saw you too, once I took my insect eyes off. You were brave being with that horrible ghost. She can be really nasty at times.”

Kaznim nodded. “I could tell. But she said she would show me the Way out, so I followed her. And I went into the **Hidden** arch and through lots of Ways, just like I did with Sam and Marwick. The boy on the desk was nice at first and he gave me the numbers, you see, so I knew where to go.”

“Was it a long way?” Tod asked.

“It was,” Kaznim said. “And some bits were really scary. But I didn’t care. I just wanted to go home to my Ammaa. But . . .” She trailed off and bit her lip. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Didn’t you find your Ammaa?” Ferdie asked gently.

Kaznim shook her head. “The sorcerer got me.”

“Oraton-Marr?” asked Tod.

Kaznim nodded. “He was on a ship in the Port of the Singing Sands. I didn’t know that was where he lived. I thought he would be in the Red City where they have lots of nasty sorcerers. Bubba saw me and called out. Then he got me.”

“Who’s Bubba?” asked Oskar.

“My little sister. The sorcerer stole her so that my mother would make sure the Egg hatched.”

Ferdie, Oskar and Tod exchanged glances. This must surely be the Orm Egg.

“The Sorcerer does that kind of thing,” Ferdie said. “He stole our little brother.”

Kaznim looked at Ferdie with fellow feeling. “Did he give him back?” she asked.

“No,” Ferdie said. “We *took* him back.”

Kaznim looked at Ferdie with disbelief. Ferdie put her arm around the girl. “And we will take Bubba back too. You’ll see. Come on, let’s go down and find some breakfast.”

But first there was something Tod really wanted to know. “So . . . why did the sorcerer bring you into the Forest?” she asked.

Kaznim gulped. “He was cross because I had stolen the Egg Boy’s box, but I gave it back because he said I would never see Bubba again if I didn’t. And then when he opened it he saw that the **Egg Timer** was missing and he was so angry . . .” Kaznim stopped and looked scared. “I told the sorcerer that the nasty boy in the shop had the **Egg Timer**. I hoped he might go and

find the boy and scare him. But then the sorcerer told me that *I* had to take him there.”

Tod’s hand closed over the **Egg Timer** in her pocket. She remembered Septimus’s conversation with Beetle about the importance of not using the Manuscriptorium Way and she was now totally on Septimus’s side. The thought that Oraton-Marr could just walk into the Manuscriptorium whenever he felt like it was horrifying. So why had he ended up in the Forest instead? Tod was about to ask exactly that when Kaznim began to speak once more, her voice trembling.

“So I went back to the little alleyway where I had come out and there was nothing there,” Kaznim said. “The arch had gone and I was so scared that I couldn’t see it however hard I tried. The sorcerer got very angry. He said he would take me to the Red City and then I was even *more* scared. I thought he was going to give me to the Red Queen for her to kill. She likes doing that, you see. She killed my father.”

Tod looked at Kaznim, surprised. “But you said that Dandra Draa killed your father.”

“Well . . .” Kaznim looked embarrassed. “He died because of what Dandra Draa did. But the Red Queen was the one who swung the sword that cut off his head. Not Dandra Draa.”

“The Red Queen did that *herself*?”

“Yes. After she had thrown him to her lion just for fun. You are lucky you have such a nice Queen here. I don’t think she would ever cut off anyone’s head, however mad she was. But in the Red City the Queen does that every week. So I thought she would do the same to me.

“I asked to say good-bye to Bubba but the sorcerer just laughed. And then everything went very fuzzy and I didn’t know where my hands and feet or even my head was; I felt like I was falling apart. The ground seemed to disappear and the next thing I knew, I was somewhere else and I was being sick all over the sorcerer’s pointy feet. I knew I was in the Red City because the ground I was being sick on was covered with dark red sand. I guessed some horrible spell had brought me there.”

“You’re right,” Tod said. “It was a really horrible spell.” She knew enough **Magykal** theory to understand that Oraton-Marr had done a **Darke Transport**—he had taken a living person with no **Magykal** skills on his

own **Transport** with no regard for her safety. No wonder Kaznim had been sick, Tod thought. She was lucky to still be alive.

“We walked along some alleyways and we came to an iron door in a wall. There was a woman standing there with a green headband and a long green cloak. I thought she was one of the Red Queen’s guards and the door led to where the lion lived. But when she saw us, the green woman looked almost as scared as I was. And even more scared when Oraton-Marr asked her where the Apprentice was.”

“Apprentice?” Tod asked.

“Yes. The woman said there had been some trouble with some mold or something. The sorcerer grabbed her by the throat and said lots of the bad words that I used to hear the Egg Boy say when he thought that no one was listening. He told the green woman to open the bad-word door and he would go and get the bad-word Apprentice himself, seeing as everyone else around him was so bad-word useless. Especially bad-word witches. And then I understood that the woman was a witch, not a guard, and that I wasn’t going to be eaten by a lion. So I felt a lot better. She opened the door and we went into a nice courtyard with a palm tree and a fountain. We walked over to the palm tree and then something really strange happened. It got cold and dark and smelled funny, and suddenly we were in a tiny hut. And then I came out of the hut, and I was in the Forest.” Kaznim looked at Tod. “And so were you.”

Oskar, Ferdie and Tod looked at one another. There were so many questions they were longing to ask Kaznim about the Orm Egg, but at that moment a bell rang far below and they heard Sarah yell, “Breakfast!”

Kaznim yawned again. “I am so tired,” she said. Like a small animal she lay down on the leaves and curled into a ball, and her eyelids fluttered closed.

The Tribe of Three left Kaznim to sleep and slowly climbed down through the trees, discussing what to do. By the time they reached the fire-pit platform they had agreed on two things. First, they would tell no one about Kaznim or what had happened the night before in the Forest. And second, they would be going through the Forest Way into the Red City as soon as they could.

SLIPPING AWAY

They found Galen stirring a bubbling pot of oatmeal. Tod gave her back the **WitchFinder** and Galen put it in her pocket with a smile. “Find any witches?” she asked.

Tod hated to lie so she said, “Yes, I did. Marissa Lane.”

Galen looked surprised. “She’s trouble, that young woman,” she said.

“She is,” Tod agreed.

Galen’s green eyes looked up keenly and Tod felt as if Galen knew exactly what had happened the previous night. But Galen did not comment. She turned her attention to the oatmeal, which was sticking to the bottom of the pan. “They’re nasty baggages, those Wendrons,” Galen said. “You want to keep out of their way, you know. Especially at night.”

Sarah and Jenna joined them for breakfast. Both sat quietly. Sarah was concerned about leaving Galen alone. Her old teacher seemed so frail in the morning light, her fragile hands shaking as she spooned out the oatmeal. Jenna was tired; she had not slept well in her pod. Silas, anxious to be away as soon as possible, had skipped breakfast and was busy packing their bags.

Tod was sipping her hot oatmeal, trying to work out how they were going to get away from the treehouse without being noticed, when a soft *whoop-whoop* came up from the Forest floor. Jenna hurried over to the edge of the platform and gave an answering *whoop*. Turning back to Galen, she said, “Ariel and Star are here. Can they come up?”

Galen did not like witches in her treehouse, but she knew that Ariel and Star were a little different. She nodded and picked up two more bowls. Witches were always hungry.

“Thank you, Galen,” Jenna said, and let down the ladder.

In the confusion caused by the arrival of Ariel and Star, Silas Heap’s sudden appearance, his overeager helping of the young witches onto the platform, and Sarah’s consequent irritation, Tod, Ferdie and Oskar slipped away. In a moment Ferdie and Oskar were shimmying down the rope to the Forest floor and Tod was climbing up to their pod. Quickly, she wrote a note: *Please do not worry. We are fine and will be back at the Castle very soon. Alice TodHunter Moon, Ferdie and Oskar Sarn.* She placed it in on the pile of blankets where it could be easily seen, then she woke Kaznim and hurried her down to join the others on the Forest floor.

Ariel and Star had a message from Septimus saying that he wanted Tod and Jim Knee back *as soon as possible*. While Jenna busied herself getting Sarah and Silas—who were on the verge of an argument—ready for the journey home, she had no idea what was happening fifty feet below on the Forest floor. Four guests—one of them uninvited—were leaving.

Oskar was looking doubtfully at the sleds. “But there’s hardly any snow under the trees,” he whispered. “They will slow us down.” Tod knew that Oskar was right. Reluctantly, she pushed the *Wiz* and the *Beetle* into some bushes and hoped they would be safe. Then, under the cover of Sarah’s raised voice in which the words “witch” and “silly old man” could easily be heard, Tod led the way along the path that she had taken the night before, while the sounds of Silas’s indignant responses faded into the distance as they moved through the trees.

Some ten minutes later, as they stood before the first two sentinels of the avenue of trees, they heard more voices. This time it was their names being hallooed in the distance, with Ariel and Star’s exuberant, whooping the loudest. The calls sounded anxious and Tod felt bad. She was for a moment tempted to head back, but as the towering trees slowly raised their branches, she was overcome by the sense that they were on an essential mission, and calling voices or no, they were going to complete it. They would return to the Castle with the Orm Egg. And then everyone would understand.

THE FOREST WAY

They walked through the avenue with a feeling of awe as the boughs rose before them in a magnificent wave. The previous night Tod had not seen the astounding height of the trees nor understood how strange it was to see branches move like limbs of a massive beast. Now, as she walked silently along with Kaznim, her feet padding on the soft carpet of fine fir needles, Tod had goose bumps running up and down her neck. Behind her came Oskar and Ferdie, staring up in amazement at the moving cage of boughs. The last two trees raised their branches and Tod led the way into the clearing. “Here we are,” she whispered. “It’s the middle one.”

Oskar and Ferdie looked disappointed. “It’s just a pile of sticks with a door,” Ferdie said.

“I know,” Tod agreed. “But that’s what everyone came out of. That’s right, isn’t it, Kaznim?”

Kaznim nodded cautiously. She wasn’t sure she wanted to go back into the hut. Suppose the sorcerer was waiting for her? Suppose this was all a trick? She could not help remembering that the Apprentice girl had picked her pocket while she slept. How could she trust someone who did that?

Tod saw the mistrust in the girl’s eyes and guessed the reason. “Kaznim,” she said. “I’m sorry I took your cards. But I did it because the cards were our only clue to where the Orm Egg is. You see, Oraton-Marr is waiting for the Egg to hatch and when it does he will **Imprint** the baby Orm so that it belongs to him. And then, when it grows up it will begin to eat rock and turn it into lapis lazuli for him and Oraton-Marr will become the most powerful sorcerer ever.”

Kaznim frowned. “Why?” she asked.

“Because lapis lazuli makes **Magyk** powerful.”

“Even **Darke Magyk**?”

“Especially **Darke Magyk**,” Tod said.

Now Kaznim understood why the Orm Egg was so important, and why Tod needed to find it before it hatched. But that did not make things any better for her. “The sorcerer said that Bubba will die if he does not hatch the Egg and get the Orm,” she whispered.

“We won’t let your sister die,” Tod said. “No way. Will we?” She turned to Ferdie and Oskar for support.

Ferdie put her arm around Kaznim. “We will keep her safe. We will rescue Bubba just like we rescued my little brother, Torr.”

“We promise,” Tod said. She looked at Oskar and Ferdie. “A Tribe of Three promise.”

“You really do promise?” Kaznim asked, still doubtful.

“We promise,” Ferdie, Oskar and Tod repeated together.

Tod knew there was one last thing she had to do to be totally honest with Kaznim. She took the **Egg Timer** from her Apprentice belt and held it out to Kaznim, who stared at it in surprise.

“Darius, the boy in the Manuscriptorium, gave it to me,” Tod said, “but I know it belongs to you really.”

Kaznim stared at the jewel-like hourglass nestling in Tod’s palm, but she did not reach for it. “It is not mine,” she said. “I stole it.”

“So, we’re even,” Tod said with a smile, pressing the **Egg Timer** into Kaznim’s hand.

Kaznim looked down at the tiny hourglass. She watched a grain of silver leave its few companions in the nearly empty section and burrow its way through the center to submerge itself in the sea of grains on the other side. She knew that another grain gone meant it was three hours closer to the Egg hatching, three hours closer to her sister being safe.

“Shh!” Oskar suddenly hissed. There was a sound like a distant wind in the avenue of trees and they could hear the soft creaking of the branches rising once more. “There’s someone—*something*—coming!” Oskar whispered.

“We’ve got to go,” Tod said. “*Now.*”

She headed toward the middle hut and with some trepidation, pushed open the door. It moved easily on well-greased hinges. Leaves crunched under her feet as Tod stepped into a conical space not unlike Galen's tree-pod. She stopped and waited for the others to follow. Oskar was last. He quickly closed the door and at once the atmosphere inside the hut changed. The sounds of the Forest vanished and a fierce light and heat replaced the damp chill. Tod took another two steps forward and she, Kaznim, Ferdie and Oskar walked out into the heat of the sun.



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PART IX

TWENTY-TWO HOURS TO HATCHING

GHOSTLY GLOAT

Back at the Wizard Tower, Septimus had a visitor. He had come back from visiting Sam in the Sick Bay and had walked into his rooms to find a small, round ghost in dark blue robes sitting on the purple sofa. She was happily swinging her feet, which did not quite touch the floor.

Septimus was not pleased. “Good morning, Miss Djinn,” he said stiffly. “This is an unexpected surprise.”

“You mean an *unwelcome* surprise,” Jillie Djinn replied tartly—and correctly.

Septimus remained standing by the door as if waiting to usher the ghost out, even though he knew there was nothing he could do to make her leave. “A ghost will go where a ghost will go,” was a saying wearily repeated in the Castle by those who could not get rid of unwelcome ghostly visitors.

“Don’t worry,” the ghost told him. “I’m not staying. I’ve come to say what I’ve come to say and then I will go.”

“What *have* you come to say?” Septimus asked. From the little smirk playing around the ghost’s lips, he guessed it was not something that would be welcome.

“I consider it my duty to tell you that yesterday the Chief Hermetic Scribe violated the solemn agreement he made with you.”

“What solemn agreement?” Septimus asked, his heart sinking.

“The solemn agreement to keep the newly discovered **Hidden** arch, the third Castle entrance to the Ancient Ways, untraveled. Yesterday, on his watch, a child **Went Through**.”

“*What?*” Septimus was immediately annoyed with himself. He had been determined not to give Jillie Djinn any satisfaction, but the news had caught him totally by surprise. He had never, *ever* dreamed that Beetle could betray his trust in this way.

The ghost's small, neat features wore a quiet look of triumph. "I will not repeat myself," she said. "Once said is quite enough. I don't like to gossip." With that, still in a sitting position, she rose vertically from the sofa and then straightened up and walked out, her feet so high off the ground that when she passed Septimus—now leaning against the doorway in shock—she was actually taller than he was.

"I like to do my duty, ExtraOrdinary Wizard," Jillie Djinn said, looking down at him. "*Someone* has to."

Septimus stared at the ghost as she wafted down the corridor. "Wait!" he called out after her.

Greatly enjoying the drama of the moment, the ghost stopped and slowly turned around.

"Who **Went Through?**" Septimus asked.

Jillie Djinn shrugged. "Oh, just a little kid. Going home, she said. I expect she got lost." The ghost could not suppress a smirk.

Something made Septimus ask, "Was she wearing a long red coat?"

"Hmm. Let me think now . . . I rather suspect she was." And with that Jillie Djinn stepped onto the silver spiral stairs and traveled with them as they slowly wound their way down. Septimus heard a few shouts of surprise drifting up and a distant yell of the classic warning cry: "Bewares, bewares, ghost on stairs!" (It was considered bad luck to ride the stairs when a ghost was on them.)

Septimus waited until the shouts had died down, then he took a deep breath and set off for the Manuscriptorium.

SHOWDOWN

In the Manuscriptorium, the scribes were finding it difficult to settle to work. They were sitting at their desks quietly, but longing to discuss the excitement of the previous day's races and the unprecedented loss of the two sleds complete with riders. Unnoticed by all, the ghost of Jillie Djinn had sidled in and was lurking in a dark corner. She was biding her time, waiting for her plans to bear fruit.

Beetle was trying to set a good example by quietly discussing the finer points of an old translation of a book of **Charms** with Romilly Badger, although neither had the heart for it. Suddenly, the door in the flimsy partition to the front office burst open, sending the windowpanes rattling. It was the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and he looked furious. A smile of pure glee appeared on Jillie Djinn's face, and she settled down to enjoy the show. It was beginning well.

Open-mouthed, the scribes watched the ExtraOrdinary Wizard stride across to their Chief. "I want a word with you," he snapped. "Right now!"

Beetle looked up, stunned. "What?" he said.

"You heard," Septimus told him.

Beetle had been Chief Hermetic Scribe a good deal longer than his old friend had been ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and he was used to being treated with respect. There was an old rivalry between the Wizard Tower and the Manuscriptorium. Beetle's professional pride was not going to put up with such rudeness from the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, whoever he might be. He glared at Septimus. "ExtraOrdinary Wizard. The Manuscriptorium is a place

of work and study and you will respect it as such. If you wish to speak to me in private, I suggest you follow me to the Hermetic Chamber.”

Septimus did not want to follow the Chief Hermetic Scribe anywhere. “On the contrary,” he snapped. “*You will follow me. To the basement.*” With that he strode through the ranks of desks, his every move followed by the gazes of silent scribes who watched the angry purple robes disappear down the wide steps that led to the Conservation Scribe’s domain and heard the *flap-flap-flap* of the swing doors, and he pushed through them.

Beetle was also good at power games. He made no attempt to follow Septimus but resumed his conversation with Romilly in a studiedly natural manner, well aware that Romilly wasn’t hearing a word he said. Beetle then made a show of checking up on other scribes’ work and only when he could find nothing else he could reasonably do did he finally head purposefully down to the Conservation basement.

Silence fell in the Manuscriptorium. It was so quiet that when a pin actually did drop, everyone jumped—and then went back to listening. What, they wondered, was the boss meant to have done?

As soon as the doors at the foot of the steps had stopped flapping, the hiss of whispered conversations broke out in the Manuscriptorium. No one dared talk too loudly for fear of missing any clue to what might be going on in the basement. They did not have long to wait. Soon Beetle’s angry voice came loud and clear.

“How dare you come marching into the Manuscriptorium like you own the place? How *dare* you speak to me like that? I will not have the office of Chief Hermetic Scribe treated with such disdain. If, in your capacity of ExtraOrdinary Wizard, you have something to say to me, you will say it in private, not in front of my scribes. I would never, *never* speak to you like that in public in the Wizard Tower.”

Up in the Manuscriptorium approving glances were exchanged along with whispers of: *You tell him, Chief!*

Septimus’s voice came sharply in response. “And *I* would never go back on a solemn agreement and put the entire future of the Castle at risk. *Never.*”

“And neither would I, Septimus.”

Of course he wouldn’t susurrated around the Manuscriptorium.

“Oh, but you *have*. Yesterday you allowed someone to travel the Manuscriptorium **Hidden** Way—the very Way you promised me faithfully that you would keep closed to all. I took you at your word, Beetle. I trusted you. But yesterday you allowed our only chance of finding the Egg of the Orm before it hatches to walk away—*through the Manuscriptorium Way*.”

“What *are* you talking about?”

Rubbish. He’s talking rubbish, the scribes whispered.

“I am talking about Kaznim Na-Draa—the girl who came with Sam and Marwick. The girl whose home is, Beetle, in case you didn’t know, the very place where the Orm Egg lies. She was our one chance to find the Egg in time.”

Why is he talking about eggs? He’s flipped. Egg-flip. Ha-ha. The scribes grinned at one another.

“But—but this is ridiculous,” Beetle protested. “This just did not happen.”

“Unfortunately, Beetle, it did. Yesterday, not only did you allow Kaznim Na-Draa to travel through the Way, but you actually *watched her go!*”

“I most certainly did not!” Beetle spluttered.

Yeah, you tell him! Beetle’s fans upstairs gave one another thumbs-up signs.

“I have a witness who saw it,” Septimus said.

“Who?” Beetle demanded.

It was at that moment Septimus felt a little less confident of his ground. “Jillie Djinn,” he said, lowering his voice.

Upstairs the scribes were whispering: *Who . . . Who did he say . . . Did you hear who it was?*

At this point Romilly got up and walked out to the office where Darius Wrenn was sitting, shivering. He jumped up guiltily when he saw her. “Darius,” she said. “I think you have something to tell the Chief, don’t you?”

Darius nodded. He got up and trailed miserably through the Manuscriptorium in Romilly’s wake, acutely aware that every scribe was watching him.

BOLTED

Beetle and Septimus were standing in front of the heavy iron door that covered the **Hidden** arch of the Way. With four automatically relocking bolts drawn across it and the key and its lock separately hidden behind secret bricks, Septimus was forced to admit that Beetle's security looked good.

"So what exactly did that wretched ghost say?" Beetle was asking.

"She said . . ." Septimus searched his memory for Jillie Djinn's exact words. The impressive state of the door and Beetle's utter incredulity had shaken Septimus's confidence. He was beginning to wonder if he had acted too precipitously. "She said it had happened on your watch."

"Well, that is totally different from me actually *watching* it," Beetle pointed out.

Septimus had to admit that was true. "But it doesn't change the fact that our only chance of getting to the Orm Egg has walked out through here and it must have been with help from someone in the Manuscriptorium. There is no way Kaznim could have done it on her own."

"But no one knows where the keys are—apart from myself," Beetle said. He was beginning to understand the enormity of what had happened. "Septimus, I am as horrified as you are. And that wretched ghost was right about it being on my watch. *Everything* is on my watch. Night and day, it is *all* my responsibility." Beetle sighed. "But I just can't figure out how a little girl who had never been here before would know about the Way, let alone know how to open the door."

Septimus, who had noticed Jillie Djinn lurking on the steps, remembered the expression of glee on her face. “Following instructions given by a spiteful ghost, maybe?” he asked.

Beetle looked horrified. “Surely not. Surely not even she would compromise the Manuscriptorium like that.”

Septimus shook his head. “I don’t know. It seems to me that some ghosts who went unwillingly into ghosthood—as I suspect your ex-Chief did—do take a delight in messing up the lives of those who come after them. Especially if they may not have had, let us say, a particularly happy relationship with that person during Life.”

Beetle nodded. Jillie Djinn had once sacked him. “Well, she’s certainly not made life easy for me since I’ve become Chief. I hate to say this, Septimus, but I think you are right.” Beetle shook his head. “But how a former Chief Hermetic Scribe could betray the Manuscriptorium is beyond me. Oh! Romilly, hello.”

Romilly had just appeared around the corner. She was pushing Darius in front of her like a reluctant trolley. “Excuse me, Chief. Darius Wrenn has something to tell you.”

Darius blinked a few times.

“Haven’t you, Darius?” Romilly prompted.

“I gave the Kaznim girl the—the numbers,” he stammered.

Beetle was puzzled. “What numbers?” he asked.

“The numbers for how to get to . . . to where she wanted to go. It was the place where we sent the leaflets before the door was locked.”

“But those are secret,” Beetle said. “You should never, *ever* have told her.”

Darius hung his head. “I know. I am really sorry. But she wanted her mother. And . . . I wanted to help her.”

“So, Darius,” Septimus said briskly. “Did you see Kaznim go into the Way?”

Darius shook his head. “No! Honestly I didn’t. I didn’t know she came down here. I thought she had run outside with the horrible ghost. They both disappeared together.”

“Ahem.” A gentle cough interrupted him. It was Ephaniah Grebe, the Conservation Scribe. Ephaniah, half man, half rat, had lost the power of human speech, but he understood it perfectly well. He handed Beetle a

hastily scribbled-upon piece of paper. His deep brown human eyes looked anxiously from his furry face as he watched Beetle read his writing.

Oskar Sarn saw the girl. He wanted to check what she was doing, but I called him back. Did not realize importance. Very very sorry.

“You have no need to apologize, Ephaniah,” Beetle said. “The fault is mine and mine alone.”

At that Darius began to relax. Maybe he wasn’t going to lose his job after all.

“Did *you* see the girl, Ephaniah?” Septimus asked.

Ephaniah nodded. He took a large pad of paper from a pocket deep in his voluminous white robes and began to write. Fascinated, Darius watched the long, delicate rat fingers holding the pen forming Ephaniah’s beautiful looped script.

Briefly. Small child. Dark curly hair. Long red robe. Oskar got better view. I will tell him to speak to you. He is here today. Is late. Unusual for him.

“Ah,” Septimus said. “Oskar Sarn had a bit of trouble on the sled run yesterday. He’ll be back soon. Queen Jenna is bringing them all back from the Forest. They should be here any minute now, in fact.”

Ephaniah’s face showed human emotions as much as any not mixed with rat. It wore a puzzled look. He was about to scrawl a few lines asking why the Queen was going to all the trouble of bringing Oskar to work, when the sound of running footsteps coming along the passageway made them all look around. Colin Partridge appeared, flustered. He flashed a quick smile to Romilly and then said, “Queen Jenna is in the front office, Chief. She wants to speak to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. At once.”

Up in the front office, Jenna waited anxiously. As the door opened and Septimus and Beetle hurried out, she took a deep breath.

“Septimus,” she said. “Tod is gone.”

“Gone?” Septimus asked, puzzled. “Gone where?”

“I’ve no idea, Sep. I saw her at breakfast in Galen’s treehouse, and then she vanished, along with her two friends. You know, those PathFinder kids. She left this.” Jenna handed Septimus Tod’s note.

Septimus read it, frowning. “What does she mean, *we are fine*? They will most certainly *not* be fine on their own in the Forest. Those witches

will get them for sure.”

Jenna put her hand on Septimus’s arm. “No, Sep. I happen to know that the Wendrons don’t have Tod. Or Oskar and Ferdie. Oh—and just to make everything really great, Jim Knee’s gone too. He ran off when we were searching and *he’s* not come back either.”

Septimus looked flabbergasted. “I don’t believe it,” he said. “I just don’t.” He sat down on a pile of books, which wobbled dangerously. “My Apprentice, run off in the Forest. My jinnee’s gone goodness knows where yet *again*, and every second that wretched Egg is getting nearer to hatching. It’s a nightmare.”

Jenna looked distraught. “I’m so sorry, Sep. We searched everywhere. I . . . I don’t know what to say. All I could think of doing was coming back to tell you myself.”

“Thanks, Jen. I appreciate that,” Septimus said.

The Queen, the Chief Hermetic Scribe and the ExtraOrdinary Wizard looked at one another, each remembering times when they were younger and had been in the middle of all kinds of troubles. Then all things had seemed possible, but now that they were older, nothing seemed possible. They weren’t sure if they liked being older very much.

Jenna spoke first. “We have to prioritize,” she said.

Septimus and Beetle looked at her expectantly.

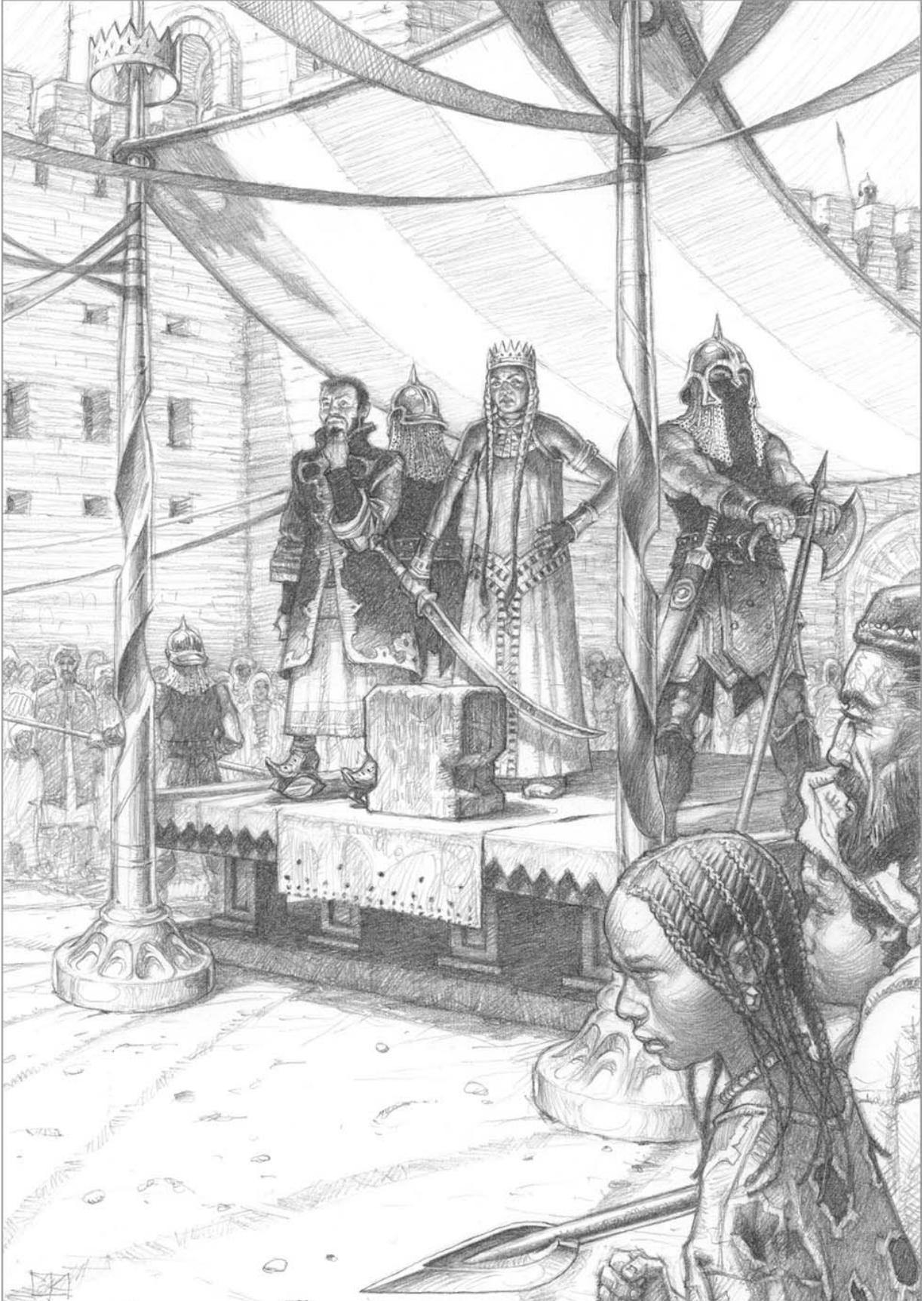
Jenna took a deep breath. She wasn’t sure how they were going to take this. “Castle first. Apprentice second. Jinnee third.”

There was a silence, and then Septimus spoke. “You’re right,” he said. “But I’m still sending out as many Wizards into the Forest as I possibly can. And as soon as I’ve done that, I am **Going Through** the Manuscriptorium Way and following Kaznim Na-Draa.”

“And I am coming with you,” Beetle said.

Jenna longed to say the same but she knew she could not. With the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and the Chief Hermetic Scribe gone from the Castle, it was her job to stay behind. *Sometimes*, Jenna thought, *being Queen is not a lot of fun*.

Septimus smiled at Beetle. “Thanks,” he said. “I really hoped you’d say that.”





PART X

TWENTY-ONE HOURS TO HATCHING

THE RED CITY

Tod walked into the blazing heat of the sun. She breathed in the hot, dry air—shocking after the chill damp of the Forest—and watched Kaznim, Ferdie and Oskar emerge, blinking, into the light. Buoyed by the familiar smells of hot sand and spices, Kaznim laughed. “Welcome to the Red City!” she said.

Tod, Oskar and Ferdie shrugged off their wolverine cloaks like sloughed skins and took stock. They were in a deserted courtyard, surrounded by high red walls made of smooth mud. The only sound was a faint trickling of water from a little culvert that ran alongside the wall to their left. Above them the backs of tall houses—a patchwork of pinky-red—reared up, the expanse broken only by a few tiny windows covered with metal grills. The sun was almost directly overhead and the place hummed with heat, the walls surrounding them like those of a kiln. Beside them rose a tall, thin palm tree, its long trunk reaching up to the sky, with a few ragged leaves at the top. It cast little shadow, but what there was had a strange shifting quality to it—this was the entrance to the Forest Way.

“Phew,” Oskar said, wiping his forehead. Both he and Ferdie felt the heat far more than Tod.

“It is cooler outside,” Kaznim said, heading off toward a door set deep in the thick wall. The polished wood was completely smooth, with only a tiny keyhole giving a clue as to how to open it. Kaznim turned around, her face a picture of dismay. “I don’t have the key,” she whispered.

“Oh, Oskie will fix that,” Ferdie said confidently.

Oskar was not so sure. One look at the tiny keyhole told him it was going to be trouble. He was right. For ten long minutes Oskar worked methodically through the layers of the weirdest lock mechanism he had ever encountered. At last Oskar heard the delicate *tic-ick* of the final cog clicking into place, and the door into the Red City swung open.

They headed out into the cool shadows of an alley. Ferdie took a tiny green felt dragon on a purple ribbon from her pocket and placed it carefully on the ground. “So we know it’s this door,” she said. Then, turning to Kaznim, she asked, “So now where?”

“We have to go to Beggars’ Gate,” Kaznim said in a half whisper. “It’s the best way to get to the road that goes to my tent.”

“A road all the way to your tent?” Oskar said. “Wow, that’s great. Easy-peasy.”

“Peasy?” asked Kaznim.

“It’s just Oskie’s silly talk,” Ferdie said. “He means it’s going to be really easy to get to your tent, as the road goes straight there.”

Kaznim looked a little embarrassed. “Well, it doesn’t quite reach my tent,” she said. “But it’s fine because at the end of the road you can see it. Well, usually. As long as there isn’t too much haze. Or wind blowing the sand.”

“Ah,” Oskar murmured.

“And we need to hurry, as it’s a long way and it’s not good to be in the desert at night. Because of the sand lions,” Kaznim added.

Oskar mentally downgraded the journey from Easy-Peasy to—in Manuscriptorium scribe-speak—a Ton of Trouble.

“Okeydokey,” Tod said in a determinedly cheerful manner. “You lead the way to Beggars’ Gate. We’re right behind you.”

Kaznim set off along the alleyway. It was bounded by tall walls made from red mud decorated with sparkling pieces of glass and mosaic. The alley wound like a snake between walled gardens, past locked doors and tiny windows set high in walls. A few thin, dusty trees rose up from the gardens and from some came the trickling sound of water, which made them feel thirsty in the dry heat. Smaller walkways branched off, winding away into deeper shadows and canyons of impossibly narrow spaces between houses. Kaznim ignored these and carried on, heading along the main alley, glancing from side to side as if searching for something.

They followed Kaznim—who, Tod thought, had an uncertain look about her—and now found themselves walking beneath bright red paper streamers looped across the alley and wound around tall posts upon which lamps were precariously balanced. Behind them now they heard the muffled sound of

drumming and rhythmic chanting echoing off the walls and surrounding them with noise.

The air was stifling and stuffy, and Tod, Oskar and Ferdie felt increasingly uncomfortable in their heavy woolen winter robes. Tod noticed that Ferdie's and Oskar's faces were almost as red as their hair, and she could feel the dampness of her own dark hair as it stuck to the back of her neck. But in front of them, Kaznim moved like a stream of cool water, her faded red coat flowing as she glided silently over the red sandy ground.

As they rounded yet another bend they heard a strange new sound—high-pitched, tinny piping—not far ahead. Kaznim, Tod noticed, had slowed down and looked uncertain. Ahead of them was a tall gatehouse, its pillars straddling the alley. Kaznim walked uncertainly into the shadows beneath and stopped dead. “Oh!” she said.

Beyond the gatehouse was a vast square festooned with red banners. It was almost empty but it was clear that a big event was going to take place soon. The tinny piping came from four soldiers in silver chain mail and long red cloaks. They stood at the corners of a central platform, which was covered in gleaming gold cloth and protected from the sun by a red-and-gold-striped awning. Four tall poles, each with a golden crown perched upon the top, rose up from each corner, and like ribbons from a maypole, bands of paper—from palest pink to deepest blood red—streamed out to other, smaller poles planted around the square so that a great network of red cast stripes of shadow across the ground. Kaznim stared at the scene before them, her hands over her mouth in dismay.

“What’s the matter?” Tod asked anxiously.

“This isn’t where we want to be. It *really* isn’t.”

“Have we gone the wrong way?” Oskar asked.

There was a note of panic in Kaznim’s reply. “I must have missed a turning. It was all that drumming. I couldn’t think.”

Tod was beginning to wonder if they had made the right decision to trust Kaznim. But she was determined to appear calm. “That’s okay,” she said. “We can retrace our steps.”

“The turning is by an old lamp with a snake wound around it.”

“You should have told us what you were looking for,” Ferdie said sharply. “We went past that ages ago. It was the first one covered in red paper.”

“We must go back. This is the Queen’s Square. It’s dangerous. We must not be here,” Kaznim whispered, her eyes wide with fear.

The Tribe of Three exchanged anxious glances. This was not looking good.

DRUMMED IN

Tod, Ferdie and Oskar followed Kaznim as she fled back down the alley. Ahead of them the sound of drumming was growing ever louder and as they hurtled around yet another corner, they came skidding to a halt. They were face-to-face with the drummers.

Both groups stopped dead. Tod, Ferdie and Oskar found themselves confronting a frightening group of about twenty teens in long cotton robes, all in different shades of red. The *tarra-taa tarra-taa* of the drumming subsided to an ominous *derummma . . . derummma . . .* as the drummers marked time, expecting Tod, Oskar, Ferdie and Kaznim to get out of the way. Fast. The front three drummers—two girls and a boy—looked wild. Their dark hair, which shone with grease, was gathered into a tall topknot with a spike driven through it. Their skin was caked in white dust and their eyes were lined with kohl, making them look as though they had been dead for some days. The wide pupils of their eyes stared at Tod, Oskar and Ferdie as though they were nothing more than insects upon the ground, while their drums continued their impatient *derummma . . . derummma . . .*

And then Kaznim was gone. Like a snake slipping into its burrow, she wriggled through a gap between two of the drummers and disappeared. Tod, Oskar and Ferdie went to follow but the drummers closed ranks. Kaznim was one of their own; they would give way to her, but not to strangers—strangers gave way to *them*.

The beat continued and the drummers pushed forward. The Tribe of Three had no choice but to step back. And with every step they took backward, the drummers took a deliberate step forward: *derummma-drum*

—step, *derummma-drum*—step. Like the sea nudging driftwood onto the shore, the tide of drummers pushed them remorselessly along the alley and swept them into the square.

The square had filled with people. From each corner through an identical gateway, a team of drummers was emerging—all dressed in red and marking the same beat. *derummma-drum . . . derummma-drum . . .*

A crowd had gathered around the central platform leaving aisles clear for various processions. As they were being marshaled into position by officials, someone yelled out: “Spies! Spies!” The cry was taken up and in seconds Tod, Oskar and Ferdie were surrounded by a group of hooded guards armed with short, broad swords. The guards herded them along the open space at the back of the crowd while the drums rolled to a crescendo. Suddenly the crowd erupted into frenzied shouts and the guards stepped up the pace, forcing their prisoners into a run at sword point. They were heading for a barred gate set into the wall and it seemed to Tod that the guards were desperate to get them there before whatever the crowd was waiting for began. As the gate drew closer Tod grew increasingly certain that once they were inside, there was going to be no way out. She *had* to do something. With no time to think, Tod threw herself to the ground as if in a faint and felt first Ferdie, then Oskar trip over her. She heard the guard commander bark an order and became aware of a sudden silence descending on the crowd. In the distance came a fanfare and Tod risked opening one eye. She had stupidly managed to fall over at the end of an aisle. She had a clear view to the platform, and those on the platform had a clear view of her.

Staring straight at them was the Red Queen. And beside her stood a familiar figure: the sorcerer Oraton-Marr.

THE RED QUEEN

A low, tense drumming began. The rhythm was that of an anxious heartbeat: two beats per second. Roughly, the guards pulled Tod, Oskar and Ferdie to their feet, then stood at attention. Tod noticed that the hands of the guard next to her were shaking. She was not surprised—the Queen was terrifying. A tall, imposing woman with long white hair held back by a simple gold crown, she put Tod in mind of a much older Jenna, but even from a distance Tod could see that there was none of Jenna’s humanity about this Queen. She was flanked on either side by two masked figures holding axes and in her hand she expertly held a long sword, the flat of its blade stained with the rust of blood but its cutting edge shining bright silver, thin and razor-sharp from the Queen’s expert honing that morning. As the Queen’s gaze ranged slowly over the Tribe of Three and they saw her adjust her grip on the sword, a stab of fear ran through them—the Queen was sizing them up with the expert eye of someone who knew the power of her blade—and wanted to use it.

The Queen’s axmen shouted an order and the drumming ceased. At each entrance on the corners of the square, just behind the assembled drummers, a great sheet of metal slid slowly down from each gatehouse tower and barred the exits. The silence in the square became tense with fear. No one knew the reason for the square being sealed and many now feared for their own lives. The Queen raised her sword and pointed at the three captives. All the faces in the crowd turned to stare.

“Sheesh,” Oskar whispered. “This is scary.”

On the dais, Oraton-Marr leaned over and said something to the Queen. She rewarded him with a frosty stare that would have turned anyone else into a shaking jelly of fear. Oraton-Marr, however, did not notice. He was buoyed by the excitement of the imminent hatching of his Orm Egg and the heady prospect of power. The unexpected sight of the Apprentice being brought to him confirmed to Oraton-Marr that all was going his way. “The one in green is promised to me,” he told the Queen. “You can do as you wish with the other two.”

The Queen tapped her foot in annoyance. She was honoring Oraton-Marr with a place on the Royal Block and a front-row seat at the morning’s executions and now he had the cheek to claim one of her captives. Did he not realize that this was *her* square and all who stepped into it gave themselves over to her? She glared at Oraton-Marr but restrained herself from doing more. She remembered that he had offered her the Queenship of a powerful Castle and thought it wise to humor him—for now. The Queen snapped her fingers at the captain of the guard at the foot of the Royal Block and said, “Bring the child strangers to me. Now!”

The captain saluted, turned on his heel and marched down the aisle toward Tod, Oskar and Ferdie. He had yet to reach them when he heard the thunder of tumbling masonry, and a gasp from the crowd. The captain risked a quick glance and it was only his rigorous training that stopped him from breaking his pace in shock. A monstrous, thirty-feet-tall figure was smashing down the barricade on the southeast gatehouse.

The figure glowed a brilliant yellow like the sun. It was broad as a house, as tall as a tower, with wild hair of gold surrounding a fine pair of horns, its eyes burning with orange fire. In one massive hand it held a chunk of the gatehouse, in the other a sword ten feet long. The ground shook with a deep rumble as the monstrous giant swept away the last remnants of the gatehouse and stepped into the square. A wild scream spread through the crowd and a stampede began, but the captain pushed on through, desperate to obey his order.

But as he lunged to grab Tod, Oskar and Ferdie, a giant yellow finger flicked him aside. As the colonel flew backward all he could think of was the fate that surely now awaited him. He had failed in his task to bring the captives to the Queen. For which he would pay.

BOUNDARIES

The yellow giant flowed along the alley that led away from the square. In order to keep its hands free it had put Tod, Oskar and Ferdie into one of its deep pockets, but they did not stay there—much as they would have liked to. Slowly, they slipped through the fragile cloth of the robes and when they tried to cling on they discovered they were grasping little more than thin air. They began to drop toward the ground, clutching at what they could. Tod was bracing herself for a fall when the giant slithered into a gap between two houses and sank to the ground like a boneless snake, taking his three passengers with him.

Tod was jubilant. “Jim Knee, you are amazing!”

Jim Knee had never done an out-of-boundary **Transformation** before. It was a risky thing, for it took the jinnee into an ethereal state where he could be trapped in a receiving vessel once again. Slowly, he gathered himself into his normal boundaries, and resumed his solid state. Jim Knee allowed himself a satisfied smile. He had always wanted to be a terrifying jinnee and now, acting under Septimus’s Command to “keep my Apprentice safe,” he had done it. However, they were not safe yet. The drumming had begun again and he could hear the distant shouts of the guards. Wozzily, Jim Knee stood up. “Time to go,” he said.

They ventured warily out into the sunlight of the festooned alley with Jim Knee leading the way. He seemed a little unsteady on his feet but he hurried along with a loping gait, as if, Tod thought, he still had a trace of tiger within. Behind them they could now hear the heavy thud of booted feet, running in step, heading their way. Jim Knee sped up; they ran fast

between the striped shadows cast by the ribbons above, following the jinnee, trusting that he knew where he was going. As they hurtled around yet another corner, they saw someone waiting by a lamppost festooned with red, below which lurked the shape of a snake.

It was Kaznim. She gave them an anxious wave but no one returned it. Kaznim had ratted on them.

Jim Knee stepped in. “Now, before we get into any unpleasantness, I would like to tell you three that if the young lady waiting for us had not been brave enough to stop a wandering tiger—that everyone else was running from, screaming—and ask it if it happened to be a jinnee, then you would all probably be in more pieces than you are right now. So just think about that before you say anything. Okay?”

“You mean, Kaznim went back to the treehouse and got you?”

“No, no. I was already here. I followed you through the avenue of weird trees. It took a bit of doing—those trees weren’t very helpful, I can tell you. You had all gone by the time I got to those funny little huts. The first one I tried I ended up in some ghastly snowy forest. So I tried the next and when I got into the courtyard I saw your footprints. I jumped the wall—it’s a wonderful thing to be a tiger—and had a bit of fun with the denizens of this fair city. And then I was approached by this young lady here, who was most insistent that I rescue you. I must do anything I could, she said. And she offered to come with me too. So all is not as it seems. I suggest a few thank-yous might be in order.”

Neither Tod nor Oskar nor Ferdie felt they could go that far. When Kaznim had left them to face the drummers alone, they doubted she had done it with the idea of saving them. But saved them she had, and they decided to let things be.

Kaznim smiled uncertainly at them all, and then to Jim Knee she said, “I like your hat.”

Jim Knee smiled. His hat—which looked like a pile of yellow donuts stuck on his head—was something he was very proud of.

“Thank you, kind lady,” he said with a small bow. “Now, lead on, Macduff.”

“Who’s Macduff?” Oskar asked, looking around, puzzled.

“The Thane of Fife,” Jim Knee answered.

“Who?” said Tod.

“Oh, ignore me,” Jim Knee said. “I’m feeling a bit light-headed with all that boundary shifting. It’s an old saying from an ancient earl—one of my favorite writers. A misquote, actually. Lead on, Miss Na-Draa. The sooner we are out of here, the better.”

Kaznim led the way, taking them confidently around twists and turns and through the narrowest of opes, cuts and paths and passageways. She ran fast and steadily through the maze until, halfway down a dark and chilly corridor between two high walls Kaznim stopped beneath a tall tower. She turned around with a puzzled expression. “I . . . I don’t know why I came down here,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Tod asked a little sharply. She had been wondering where they were going for some time. It seemed a convoluted way to get to one of the main routes out of the city.

Kaznim rubbed her eyes and blinked. She looked quite disoriented. “I don’t understand it . . .” She shook her head. “This isn’t the right way. I *know* it isn’t.”

“So why on earth did you take us here?” Tod asked crossly.

“Now, now,” Jim Knee said. “No arguing. It’s easy to get lost here. I’m sure that—”

A sudden scream from Kaznim rang out. A dark, winged animal was falling from the window of the tower and heading for them. Before anyone had time to react, a net had dropped onto Tod and was wrapping itself around her like a snake. Ferdie and Oskar tried to tear it away, and Jim Knee pulled out his flick knife and leaped up to try to cut the rope that snaked down from the window at the top of the tower. But Jim Knee, like Ferdie and Oskar, could do nothing. The rope was like steel and already Tod was being lifted out of his reach. Up, up, up she went, swinging precariously on the end of a thin rope while someone at the top of the tower hauled her in like a fish. The jinnee watched in dismay, knowing there was nothing he could do. His out-of-boundary **Transformation** had exhausted him and he must stay as he was for some hours before he could **Transform** again.

Tod looked down. She saw four horrified faces staring up at her—and then she was dragged through an open window into a cool, round room at the top of the tower. The net opened and she was dumped unceremoniously onto the cold tile floor.

THE DARKE DART

Ferdie and Oskar stared up in shock. A hand reached out from the window; between its finger and thumb was a small but deadly **Darke Dart**. A moment later the **Dart** was winging its way down to the upturned faces below. Jim Knee caught it. The poisoned tips cut through his fingers and he dropped to the ground. Ferdie rushed to help him, but the jinnee shooed her away. “Run!” he said, his voice harsh with pain. “Go back to the Forest.”

“We’re not leaving Tod,” Oskar said stonily.

“On her own,” added Ferdie.

“She is not alone. I am here,” Jim Knee said hoarsely.

Ferdie, Oskar and Kaznim took a few steps back, but they did not take their eyes off Jim Knee. He looked awful. A blue pallor was spreading across his skin and his face was shiny with sweat. No one liked to say it, but right then it didn’t look like Jim Knee would be there for much longer.

“Get out of here. Now . . .” Jim Knee gasped. “Kaznim . . . knows the way.”

“We’re not going anywhere with *her*,” Ferdie told him. “She set this up.”

“She’s a double-crossing low-down spy,” Oskar added for good measure.

Kaznim looked aghast. “I’m not! I promise you. I don’t know why I came here. I *don’t*.”

“Witch’s **Draw**,” Jim Knee said weakly. He looked at Kaznim. “I saw it . . . in your eyes when you turned around. Not . . . your fault.”

“Nothing ever seems to be her fault,” Ferdie observed tartly. “But bad stuff always happens when she’s around.”

“Some people . . . are unlucky that way,” Jim Knee said with fellow feeling. “Now *go*.”

“No,” Oskar and Ferdie said together. “We are *not* leaving Tod.”

Jim Knee did not have the strength to argue. “Very well. But go for now. To the courtyard. When midnight strikes . . . she will come to you. All will be . . . as it will be.”

“Just because you are a jinnee doesn’t mean you have to talk in riddles,” Ferdie told him sternly.

“I shall talk how I want to,” Jim Knee said sharply. His annoyance seemed to give him strength. He sat up and said, “Now *go away*. What use is your having a jinnee if you won’t let him be one? Now just *pop off*, will you?”

An arm shooting out from the window at the top of the tower stopped any more discussion. Reluctantly, they turned and walked slowly back through the chill of the dismal, dark alley.

Kaznim led the way back to Ferdie’s dragon, which lay waiting for them in the dust. Oskar opened the door with two quick turns of his lockpick and in a moment they were inside the courtyard.

They stood in the heavy, late-afternoon heat and listened to the stillness broken only by the soft burble of water running in the culvert.

“We’ll stay here until midnight,” Ferdie said. “And if Tod isn’t back by then we’re going to go to that horrible tower and rescue her. Whatever Jim Knee says.”

“How will we know when midnight is?” Oskar wondered.

“There will be no mistaking it when it comes,” Kaznim said.

Ferdie and Oskar glanced at each other. Kaznim’s words sounded ominous.

THE PRISONER IN THE TOWER

Within the tendrils of the **Darke** net, Tod shivered. Every spot where the fine strands touched her skin felt like burning ice. She sat absolutely still while Marissa snipped through the net with a tiny, sharp pointed pair of silver scissors, and to her relief, not once did the witch's hand slip. While she sat, Tod had time to work out her strategy. She was very frightened, but she was determined not to give Marissa the satisfaction of knowing it. And so, as the last strands fell to the floor and Marissa trotted over to the window to fix its bar back into place, Tod pushed down her fear and very deliberately replaced it with anger.

When Marissa turned around with a smug little smile she was met with an angry glare. "You pig," Tod said. "You low-down piece of—"

"La-di-da, la-di-da," Marissa trilled loudly, drowning out the rest of Tod's words. "Just calm down. I'll bring you a nice sherbet and some stuffed dates."

"You can stuff your dates where the—"

"Now, now, Alice," Marissa interrupted. "There is no need to be such a grumpy cow. You're lucky—the trouble is, you just don't realize it yet. You're on the fast track to fame and fortune. You'll soon be back at the top of your precious Wizard Tower with a *much* more powerful boss. Septimus Heap is nothing"—Marissa snapped her fingers dismissively—"compared to His Highness."

"His *Highness*?"

Marissa glanced at the door nervously and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Oraton-Marr. He likes to be called that. See, there's a handy little

tip from me. Don't say I don't look out for you." Marissa giggled and pranced out before Tod had the time to fling back a retort. She heard a heavy bolt being slid across, then the tinny sound of footsteps disappearing down stone stairs.

Tod raced to the window to look out. She had watched Marissa drop the **Darke Dart** and was terrified of what she might see below. But there was no one there. *No one*. Tod bit back a surge of disappointment. She had hoped for some friendly faces gazing up at her. But her friends had gone. They hadn't even bothered to wait a few measly minutes.

Tod leaned back against the wall and told herself not to be so silly. To wait beneath somewhere where two **Darke Darts** had been thrown was suicide. She should be grateful that neither Oskar nor Ferdie was lying in the dust far below. However, Tod was not a bit grateful that Kaznim seemed to have escaped too. The more she thought about it, the more obvious it was that Kaznim had led them into a trap. She sighed. Jim Knee was a rotten judge of character.

Depressed by the emptiness outside the window, Tod slowly began to pace her prison. It was a small, circular room and it took her thirty paces to walk the circumference. She came first to a little door set in the wall about two feet up from the floor. She pulled it open to find a musty cupboard containing a bucket and a shelf with a folded blanket and small, embroidered pillow. Apart from the cupboard the only other details of interest were the door through which Marissa had gone out—ancient wood hard as stone and studded with flat-headed nails—and the window through which she had been dragged, which now had an iron bar screwed into the middle of it. The floor felt solid and was covered with tiny green and blue diamond-shaped tiles and the walls were smooth, reddish stone—as was the ceiling, which curved up into a perfectly round dome. The only ways out were the door and the barred window.

Tod paced the circumference a few more times. She must, she told herself, keep a clear head. It shouldn't be too difficult to outwit a birdbrained, two-timing witch like Marissa Lane. Tod pushed away a niggling thought that Marissa was possibly not as birdbrained as people thought she was and was, in fact, turning out to be a particularly nasty force to be reckoned with. Tod wandered back to the window and did what all prisoners do if they can—she gazed out to the free world beyond. Once

again she peered down to see if there was any sign of Jim Knee or Ferdie and Oskar but the alley was deserted. She stared down for some time, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone hiding or watching out for her, but she saw nothing. To counter her feeling of desolation, Tod looked out across the flat red rooftops, many with faded washing spread out to dry in the sun, trying to spot any sign of life. There were a few children playing on a rooftop some distance away and an old man laying out some faded clothes to dry. There was an assortment of cats dozing in the evening warmth and oddly, a small donkey standing patiently on a rooftop. Then once again Tod looked down into the alley below, but as ever it was deserted.

To take her mind off people—or the lack of them—Tod turned her attention to the glimpse of desert on the far right of her view. It, too, was empty. There was nothing to see but sand dunes rolling into the distance like a long, slow swell on the ocean. The very thought of the sea made Tod feel horribly homesick for the village where she had grown up. There had been sand there too, but it had been mixed with grasses, bounded by the ocean and home to a village of tall houses on stilts. The sand Tod now saw was vast and featureless. She watched the sun dipping toward the distant dunes and saw the sky turn as red as the mud from which the entire city seemed to be built.

Marissa kept Tod waiting. It was not until the room was nearly dark that she returned with a tray on which were a small candle, a large jug of sherbet and a plate of dates stuffed with marzipan. “His Highness is dining with the Queen tonight,” Marissa said. “He’ll fetch you in the morning. You’ll find some bedding in the garderobe and a bucket.” She sniggered. “Not quite the delights of the Wizard Tower but you’ll be back there soon enough. Ha-ha. See ya!” With that Marissa was gone, slamming the door. Once again Tod heard the bolt being shot and the tippy-tappy footsteps departing.

Tod drank most of the sherbet—a sweet, slightly fizzy drink that tasted of a fruit she did not recognize—but she felt too miserable to eat. And then she resumed her place at the window and watched the nighttime lights of the city appear.

ITSY-BITSY SPIDER

In the time-honored manner of jinn, Jim Knee was not as absent as he appeared to be. Lurking in the shadows at the foot of the tower—waiting for the onset of night, when the sharp eyesight of arachnid-eating birds was no longer a danger—was a fat yellow spider. It sat huddled in the dust-filled angle where the foundations of the tower rose up from the alleyway and tried to avoid looking at any of its eight hairy legs, which were folded beneath it in a most uncomfortable manner. Jim Knee had a revulsion for exoskeletons and a difficulty with more than four legs. The spider combined both to an unsatisfactory degree but he could see no other solution to his present problem, which was to obey his Master and keep his Apprentice safe—an Apprentice who seemed to have a remarkable talent for getting into dangerous situations. Jim Knee tried to shake his head but discovered he didn't really have one.

As the shadows of twilight began to deepen, the spider unfolded its legs, stood up, toppled over, untangled the third leg from the fourth, and after three attempts managed to balance on all eight legs. Then it set off unsteadily to find some food. It had a long night ahead.

It was many hours later when the spider returned to the foot of the tower, replete with the liquefied insides of two moths and a baby beetle. All of its eight eyes looked up anxiously at the vertical red wall that rose before it, and like a climber checking his rope, the spider checked its spinnerets and spun a short length of silk. It tickled, but to the spider's frustration it was unable to giggle. It placed two wavering front legs onto the rough red mud of the wall and began to climb, remembering to keep four legs on the

wall at all times. *Four legs down . . . four legs up . . . four legs down . . . four legs up . . .* was the rhythm to which the spider climbed.

Tod did not like spiders. So when a particularly large one sporting a nasty, poisonous-looking yellow body and long hairy legs appeared on the window ledge and began waving its two front legs at her, Tod fought very hard to suppress a shriek. She backed away from the window, where she had been gazing up at the stars, and watched it for some moments, wondering what to do. The thought that the spider might drop into the room and then she would be spending the night with it at large gave her courage. Steeling herself, she ran at it and flicked it off the window ledge.

Jim Knee suddenly found himself flying. Instinctively, he stretched his hairy legs out like a parachute to slow his fall and the spinnerets in his abdomen began churning. He became aware that above him a silken thread was trailing in the breeze, and as the ground drew frighteningly close he felt the thread snag against the rough wall of the tower and his fall was abruptly halted. Jim Knee dangled ignominiously for some seconds as his spider brain struggled to take in what had happened. He swung back and forth like a demented pendulum until a deft twist took one of the swings close to the wall. Jim Knee's spiky pincers at the end of his two front legs (how he hated pincers) caught against the stone, and in a moment he was scuttling back up the wall, trailing the silken thread behind him.

Tod was horrified to see two yellow spider legs waving at her as they felt their way over the windowsill. Once again she steeled herself to flick the spider away but this time the spider was prepared. It wrapped its legs around the window bar and Tod recoiled. She watched the spider, wondering what to do. Slowly, the spider unwrapped its legs from the bar and once more waved them around. Tod was dismayed. It was obviously one of those aggressive ones that jumped on people and bit them. Tod made a decision: she was going to have to kill it. She picked up the brass tray that Marissa had left behind and slowly advanced.

The spider saw what was coming and thought fast. There was a flash of bright yellow light and Tod dropped the tray with a clang. She stared at the window where the flash had come from: the spider had disappeared but in its place were two sets of elegant fingers clinging to the window bar. Suddenly Tod understood. "Jim Knee!" she gasped. She rushed to the

window to see the jinnee dangling precariously two hundred feet above the ground.

“Kindly desist from attacking me with that tray, Apprentice,” Jim Knee said. “I have come to rescue you, if you will allow me to do so.”

“I am so sorry!” said Tod. “Can I help . . . er, maybe I could pull you inside?”

“No, thank you,” Jim Knee said. “Before my plan was so rudely interrupted I intended to leave you a thread.” He sighed. “Now I shall have to **Transform** once again into a nasty little hairy thing with too many legs and a bad attitude. I do not like the way a spider thinks, I can tell you. Right then, I will be off.”

Tod felt desolate. “Please don’t go, Jim Knee. I am truly sorry.”

“I’m not leaving you forever, child,” Jim Knee said wearily. “Before my fingers give up, you need to understand what to do. I will leave a thread behind, which will go all the way to the ground. When I am back on the ground I will **Transform** into myself and attach the thread to a cord. You will then pull the thread up and the cord will come with it. You will loop the cord around the bar and drop it back to me. This is important because once you are on the ground we can pull it all down and no one will be any the wiser. Got that?”

Tod laughed with relief. “Yes! It’s brilliant. Oh, thank you. And I am so sorry about the tray.”

“I hope you are. And now I am going to **Transform**, so please try to restrain yourself.”

Sheepishly, Tod stepped back. There was another flash of yellow light and once more the spider sat upon the windowsill. The next moment it was gone. Tod rushed to the window and saw it flying down through the air, a thin thread trailing behind it, glinting in the light of the torches burning in the alleyway below. She took the fine, slightly sticky thread between her finger and thumb and wrapped it around the bar, just to be sure.

While Jim Knee attached the cord below, Tod went to the cupboard and took out the rugs and the bucket. Then she slipped off her cloak, placed its hood over the bucket and rolled up one of the rugs to form the shape of her body. She arranged her “bed” carefully in the shadows opposite the door and stood back to inspect her work. Tod was satisfied. Anyone taking a quick look—particularly a lazy pig like Marissa—would think she was

sleeping quietly. Tod drank the rest of the sherbet, put the dates into her pocket and returned to the window.

Everything worked as Jim Knee had planned. Tod watched the jinnee tie the end of a long length of worryingly thin cord to the spider thread and at a signal from him, she pulled the thread very carefully upward, holding it away from the rough stone of the walls, praying that it would not break. But the jinn spider had spun a particularly strong silk. Soon Tod had the cord looped around the bar and was running it back down to Jim Knee. Now came the scary bit. She had to wriggle out through the gap between the bar and the edge of the window and *not fall*.

As Tod climbed out the window, a high, thin bell tolled in the distance. Determined not to look down, she grasped both lengths of the cord, leaned outward—just as she always used to when climbing down the side of her house in the PathFinder village—and began her descent.

Halfway down Tod very nearly fell off in surprise. A cacophony of chimes all across the city began to strike up. It was the midnight chiming of the thousand Red City clocks—the very moment that Jim Knee had timed his rescue for. The huge variety of chimes filled the air; moderate, mellow tones keeping pace with each other, deep, slow, resonant chimes overtaken by rapid, excitedly tinny chimes. Long and deep, high and fast, doubles and trebles, every clock in the Red City waited twenty-four hours for its moment of glory and made the most of it when it came. They each chimed twenty-four times and were still going when Tod reached the ground.

To the echoes of the last long, low booms, Tod helped Jim Knee pull down the cord. As they slipped away into the shadows, the jinnee allowed himself a smile. “Perfect. No one will have heard a thing with all that racket going on.”

In the room at the top of the tower, the door opened and Marissa peered in. “G’night, *Alice*,” she said. “Sleep well. You’ve got an *egg-citing* day tomorrow. Ha-ha!” Marissa stared at the unresponsive form for a few seconds. “All right, sulky brat. Be like that, then.” She turned on her heel and slammed the door behind her.

In the stillness of the room, the bucket fell out of its hood and rolled across the floor.

MIDNIGHT IN THE COURTYARD

Ferdie, Oskar and Kaznim were sitting in the chill of the courtyard, wrapped in the discarded wolverine skins. “What’s the time?” whispered Ferdie.

“You keep asking that,” Oskar said, a little snappily.

A few seconds later a high, clear chime rang through the night air. “That’s the midnight Harbinger bell,” Kaznim said.

They listened as the sound of the bell died away. “But it’s not chiming midnight,” Oskar said.

“Just wait,” said Kaznim. A few seconds later the midnight peals began. The courtyard turned into a bowl of sound and the three sat suspended within it, entranced. As the last deep chimes faded Oskar whispered, “That was so beautiful.”

They sat in the silence and waited. Nothing happened. “I thought Jim Knee said Tod would be here at midnight,” Ferdie whispered.

“He did,” Oskar said. And as he spoke, the door to the courtyard opened and in walked Jim Knee and Tod.

“Tod!” Ferdie and Oskar shouted together.

“Shh!” hushed Jim Knee. He looked around the courtyard anxiously. “This place gives me the creeps,” he said. “Let’s go.”

No one needed any persuasion.

“Kaznim knows the way,” Ferdie told Tod.

Tod was feeling a little edgy. “I bet she does,” she said. “Just like she knew the way to the ambush at Oraton-Marr’s tower.”

“Oh, Tod, that’s not fair. Jim Knee explained,” Ferdie protested.

“Explained that she double-crossed us? He explained that, did he?”

“*Stop bickering,*” Jim Knee intervened. “Miss Na-Draa was under a Witch’s **Draw**. It was not her doing. Anyway, no one is going anywhere with Miss Na-Draa unless she decides to come back to the Forest with us.”

But Tod had not escaped from Oraton-Marr’s clutches only to run back home. “We’re not going to the Forest,” Tod told the jinnee. “We’re going into the desert to get the Egg of the Orm. You *know* that, Jim Knee.”

“I know no such thing,” Jim Knee replied. “My Command is to keep my master’s Apprentice safe.”

“*And* to seek out the Egg of the Orm,” Tod told Jim Knee.

“Indeed. But my Master gave me two separate Commands. And if two Commands are incompatible—which these are, for I cannot seek the Egg of the Orm *and* keep you safe—the human safety Command prevails. So I am taking you back to the Forest.”

“I’m not going,” said Tod.

“Yes, you are.” Jim Knee took a step toward Tod only to find his way barred by Ferdie and Oskar.

“Are you Commanded to force me to do something against my will?” Tod demanded.

“Well . . . no. I am not.”

“But I am refusing to go,” Tod said. “And if you make me go I will fight you. And because you are much more powerful than I am, I shall get hurt. Which is hardly very safe.”

Jim Knee was shocked. “I would never hurt you, Alice,” he said. He sighed. “You have the luxury of free will. I do not. I gave that away in exchange for my succession of lives. So I will leave you to enjoy your free will and trust that it all turns out as you wish. Farewell.” With that Jim Knee bowed and walked into the center of the courtyard.

“Wait!” Tod called.

Jim Knee turned. He had expected a change of heart at the last minute. Humans were prone to panicking when left alone, especially young ones. “Yes, Alice?” he asked, a little smugly.

“Will you wait a moment, please? I want to write a note for you to give to Septimus. To tell him where we are. And where the Egg is.” Tod rapidly scribbled the note and handed it to Jim Knee.

Jim Knee looked at the note disdainfully. "I am not a Message Rat," he said.

Tod pushed the note into the jinnee's reluctant hand. "This is part of your Command," she told him. "If you give it to him, I will be safe."

With the uncomfortable feeling that Tod had outwitted him, Jim Knee took the note. Then he stepped into the pool of darkness in the center of the courtyard and disappeared.

WHISTLING IN THE DARK

“Kaznim,” Tod said, “can you guide us to your tent from here? Please?”

Kaznim looked at Tod. She did not answer.

Tod was not surprised. Now that they were in Kaznim’s territory the balance of power had shifted. The Tribe of Three needed Kaznim to take them to the Egg, but Kaznim no longer needed the Tribe of Three to help her get home. She could do that for herself. Now they were nothing more to Kaznim than three people who would place her sister in grave danger if they got their way about the Orm Egg.

The Tribe of Three exchanged glances. Tod could see that Ferdie and Oskar were thinking the same thing she was. So all were surprised when Kaznim said, “We must follow the stars. Just before dawn, my tent will be beneath the Great Palm of Dora.”

“Can you see trees in the dark?” Ferdie wondered.

“It’s a constellation,” Kaznim said.

“I don’t know that one,” Tod said, puzzled.

“Our star names are different from yours,” Kaznim said. She frowned. “I hope we do not cross the path of the sand lions.”

“Sand lions?” Oskar whispered.

“The lionesses hunt all night at this time of year, for their cubs are growing fast.”

Oskar and Ferdie exchanged anxious glances. “Maybe we should wait until daylight,” said Oskar.

“But we have to get to the Egg as soon as we can,” Ferdie said. “Don’t we, Tod?”

Tod nodded. "I've got an idea," she said. "We might have to wait a bit, but it will be worth it." She drew out the *Wiz's* silver whistle and blew. No sound came but Tod could feel the vibrations in her throat. The whistle had worked.

Oskar knew what Tod was doing. "It won't hear you," he said.

"It might," said Tod.

"*What* might?" Ferdie asked.

Tod didn't want to say, in case nothing happened, which seemed very likely. She reached into her pockets. "Anyone want a date?" she asked.

They sat in the darkness of the courtyard, eating the stuffed dates supplied by Marissa and listening to the sounds of the nighttime Red City. Once they heard footsteps approaching, but they passed by safely. Another time they heard the shrieks of fighting cats. And then, drifting across the rooftops, came a scream. "*Noooooo!*"

"Was that Marissa?" Ferdie whispered.

"I don't think so," Tod said, uncertain. All screams sounded much the same.

Oskar looked anxiously at the door. "If it was . . . she'll come looking for you. And this is the first place she'll come."

Ferdie was on her feet, convinced that Marissa was on her way. "Tod, we've got go. *Now*," she said.

"I know, I know . . ." Tod said. "But please, just a moment longer. It's on the way now, I'm sure it—" Tod was cut short by a flash of silver shooting out from beneath the palm. With perfect timing, the *Wiz* arrived. And behind it, to Tod's surprise, came the *Beetle*. Someone had carefully knotted the sleds' ropes together.

Ferdie stared at Tod as though she had gone crazy. "What do you want those for?" she asked.

"To get to the Orm Egg, of course," Tod said, trying to unknot the intricately joined ropes.

"Tod, those are *sleds*," Ferdie said. "For *snow*. They can't run on sand."

Tod grinned. "Want to bet on it?" she asked.

Ferdie gave her friend a quizzical look. "You know something about the sleds that we don't," she said. "I can tell."

"Well, Oskie knows it too, don't you, Oskie?"

"Knows what?" asked Oskar.

“About the SandRider **Charm**.”

Oskar looked blank.

“It was in that book, Oskie,” Tod told him. “The one that Beetle—I mean the Chief—gave us about the sleds’ history.”

Oskar looked sheepish. “I didn’t get around to reading it.”

“Well, you missed something really interesting. The **Charm** for these sleds actually comes from the desert. Ancient sorcerers used huge sleds for traveling across the sands. They called them SandRiders. And the *Beetle* and the *Wiz* are both SandRiders.”

“Wow . . .” Oskar breathed. “They run on sand?”

“Yes. Even better than on snow.”

Oskar grinned. He was suddenly looking forward to the desert a whole lot more. He kneeled down and helped Tod undo the ropes, which were tied in a very complicated knot—the kind that a turtle trader’s wife once used to secure her turtle baskets.

FIND HER!

Somewhat unsteadily, Oraton-Marr was on his way back to the tower. The Queen's banquet had been an exciting taste of many important occasions he knew were to come and he had made a few mental notes on it for the life he was planning for himself in the Castle. He had particularly liked the live ducklings over which scalding-hot orange sauce was poured before the diner. This was most definitely a tradition he intended to start. He could set up a nice little hatchery on the banks of their muddy little river . . .

Oraton-Marr's mind traveled back to the earlier events of the day. He had very much enjoyed the ceremony in the Queen's Square, even though it had been cut short by that monstrous jinnee and the Queen had had to postpone the beheadings. The sorcerer turned his thoughts to another Queen, far away—Jenna, the Castle Queen. She was, the witch had told him, no more than a girl living in a ratty old building that needed pulling down. Well, he'd soon get rid of her and her crumbling old palace. In fact, Oraton-Marr mused, most of the Castle could do with being razed to the ground; the Wizard Tower was the only decent building in it. Once he'd taken charge of that and got the Red Queen installed in a nice new palace, he'd make sure she kept the Castle under control and operating as he wished. He would insist she had a compulsory weekly roll call for all Castle inhabitants to keep them in order and let them know who was in charge. From what he had seen of the Castle in his clandestine visits through a scrappy little arch high above the Moat, the place was a shambles. But the Wizard Tower was another matter. That was very impressive indeed; he certainly would not object to living there . . .

Oraton-Marr bounced happily along the alleyways, mulling over his plans, looking forward to greeting his Apprentice in her prison. The girl would be quite amenable by now, he thought. He took the narrow ope that led to the side gate of the Queen's guest tower—known as the Hospitable Gard—and let himself in.

Marissa was dozing in a chair in the entrance hall. She jumped guiltily to her feet as the door swung open.

Oraton-Marr frowned. "I hope you have been keeping watch," he said.

"I haven't moved," Marissa assured him.

"Well, you can move now," the sorcerer told her. "I need to sit down."

Marissa stepped aside and Oraton-Marr sank gratefully into her chair. He pulled off his spring blades with a sigh of relief and threw them clattering onto the floor. "My feet are killing me," he muttered.

After Marissa had brought him a restorative sherbet, Oraton-Marr said, "Right then, let's have a look at my little key to all the Wizard Tower passwords."

After a weary climb, Marissa drew back the bolts and stepped aside to let Oraton-Marr in.

"Bucket!" She heard him gasp—and then the metallic sound of the bucket being kicked across the floor. The next moment Oraton-Marr had his hands around Marissa's neck.

"Where *is* she?" he hissed.

"Erg . . ." Marissa gurgled. The hands were squeezing so hard, she could hardly breathe. Not a moment too soon, Oraton-Marr let go. Marissa swayed with relief. It was all she could do not to fall to the floor, but she understood well enough that to show weakness was dangerous. "It's no good you getting in a temper," Marissa told him hoarsely. "She must be here. She's done some kind of kids' **UnSeen**. She didn't get out past me, I know that."

Oraton-Marr was furious. "I can tell you, she is *not* here. Are you suggesting I cannot **See** the spell of a child?" he demanded. Marissa wisely refrained from saying that yes, that was exactly what she was suggesting. She watched Oraton-Marr check the room for an **UnSeen** Tod, but he knew she was gone. He could **Hear** no human heartbeat. How she had escaped was a mystery, but that did not matter. The mystery only added to her value;

the Apprentice was clearly talented. She *must* be retrieved. He wheeled around to Marissa and screamed into her face, “*Find her!*”

The Tribe of Three and their guide were heading toward the distant light of the two torches burning on either side of the Beggars’ Gate, when a high-pitched shriek echoed across the rooftops: “*Find her!*” They picked up speed and hurried on.

Inside the Hospitable Gard, Oraton-Marr was—as Marissa observed with dismay—in a panic. How was this sorcerer going to set her up as Witch Mother of the Wendrons if he couldn’t even work out where a stupid kid Apprentice had gone? It was obvious to anyone with half a brain. Marissa, however, was far too clever to use those words to Oraton-Marr.

“Your Highness.” She coughed tactfully.

“*What?*”

“The Apprentice—I mean *your* Apprentice—will surely have taken the Forest Way back to her home. I can go after her if you wish.”

Oraton-Marr tried not to look relieved, even though he felt it. Of course that was where she had gone. Why hadn’t he thought of that himself? Oraton-Marr remembered how the Red Queen had proudly told him that every one of her guest towers contained a windowless dungeon complete with nests of scorpions for the convenience of her guests. “Servants,” she had told him, “can be such trouble.”

“Very well,” he said. “Go after the girl. Bring her back and lock her in the scorpion dungeon. That will teach her that she will not trifle with *me*.”

Marissa dropped a curtsy and turned to go. Oraton-Marr shouted after her, “Marissa. Before you go, call me a camel, will you?”

Marissa was glad she was facing away from the sorcerer. She fought to gain control of the laugh that was bubbling up. Over the past few weeks there were many things she had thought of calling Oraton-Marr, but a camel had not been on the list. Marissa spluttered and managed to turn it into a cough.

“One from the Queen’s stable. With a night desert guide,” Oraton-Marr added.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Marissa gasped. She ran to the courtyard door, wrenched it open and, at the end of the alley, at last allowed herself to

collapse into giggles.

The camel and night guide were duly delivered to the courtyard of the Hospitable Gard, and Marissa hurried off to the Forest Way. She was not looking forward to negotiating the Nighttime Forest but, she told herself, she probably wouldn't have to. No doubt she would find Tod huddled in the hut at the other end of the Forest Way, too scared to leave. She would be back with her in no time.

But all Marissa found waiting at the end of the Forest Way was a pack of hungry wolverines.





PART XI

FIVE AND A HALF HOURS TO HATCHING

THE CITY OF THE FREE

The Beetle and the Wiz swished noiselessly toward Beggars' Gate. "It will be unguarded," Kaznim had told them. "No one bothers with beggars here. In the Red City, they say that the poorer you are, the freer you become. They call their encampment 'The City of the Free' because the Queen's guards never come here. But really, lots of the people here aren't beggars at all. They just want to not be scared all the time."

They walked through the pool of light cast by the torches, their flames steady in the still night air, beneath the redstone arch and then were out of the city. They stopped and gazed at the strange sight before them—the ground dropped down into a sea of flickering lights, an earthly reflection of the starlit sky above. They were aware of the low murmur of conversation mixed with the soft snuffles of sleep and knew they were in the presence of hundreds of people.

They followed Kaznim as she walked slowly along the track that curved down to the lights below, and as the track leveled out, Tod heard the whisper of a voice. "Spare a peckrin, miss?" Tod stopped and peered down. An old man wrapped in a swathe of blankets was looking up at her, his hand outstretched. Guessing that a peckrin was a small coin, Tod said, "I'm sorry. I don't have any money with me."

"Ah, so you've come to join us, have you?" the man asked.

"Er, no. We're . . . we're heading for the desert."

"You're mad," came the response. A thin white arm extended from the blankets and pointed into the desert. "There's a pride on the prowl out there. Saw them at dusk. You'll be dead in an hour."

"Oh!" Tod gasped.

"Good thing we've got the sleds, then," Oskar said with a grin. "We'll outrun any pride. Easy-peasy."

Kaznim led them slowly along a narrow, winding path that wandered through the City of the Free. Tod was fascinated by the huge variety of tents, ranging from a simple blanket thrown over bent poles to beautiful circular structures made from embroidered cloth with carved wooden doors. Many tents shone with the warm glow of candlelight, which cast shadows of the people within, sitting talking quietly. The soft buzz of conversation reminded Tod of wandering through her village late at night and she felt a pang of homesickness. An urge to turn around and run almost overcame her, but Tod reminded herself that if she wanted the places and the people she loved to stay safe, then she, Ferdie and Oskar were going to have to go into the desert that night and find the Orm Egg.

Before long the City of the Free lay behind them, and they stood on the edge of the wide darkness of the desert. From somewhere in the distance a long, low roar came drifting across the sands.

THE YELLOW OWL

A large yellow owl landed on the roof of the Manuscriptorium, where it sat for some minutes digesting a particularly bony shrew before it spat out a pellet and watched it roll down into the gutter.

Down in the Conservation basement, Darius Wrenn was dwarfed by four figures. Each one scared him for a different reason. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard scared him because he could turn him into a toad or something. Ephaniah Grebe scared him because he was half rat and Marwick scared him because he reminded Darius of a wolf. But the person who upset him the most was Beetle, his boss. Beetle just looked very disappointed, and that made Darius feel worst of all.

The intimidating group was gathered around one of Ephaniah's worktables, upon which a strange-looking map was spread out. Beetle pushed a list of numbers across to Marwick. "These are the Ways we took the flyers through," he said. He turned to Darius. "Are these the Way numbers that you gave to the girl, to Kaznim Na-Draa?"

Darius nodded.

"You are sure?"

Beetle sounded so stern that it was all Darius could do to squeak, "Yes."

Darius watched Marwick check the numbers against the map. After some minutes Marwick looked up and said, "It goes to the Port of the Singing Sands—to a **Hidden** arch. It's the end of the road."

"Sounds right to me," Beetle said. "I could hear gulls." He grinned. "Actually, I didn't see much. I just dumped the flyers and ran."

Marwick smiled at Darius. "You remembered the Ways well."

“He would have done better to have remembered his Manuscriptorium Promise,” Beetle said.

Darius gulped and stared at his shoes. He wished he could disappear. If only he could get through the big door and into the Way, he would run and run and run and never, *ever* come back.

“Ah, well,” Marwick said. “I don’t suppose he meant to. And he *was* under instructions to be helpful.”

Darius cast a grateful glance at Marwick, who was carefully rolling up the map. “Need a guide?” Marwick asked Septimus.

“Yes, please,” Septimus said. “If you don’t mind leaving Sam?”

Marwick smiled. “Sam needs to sleep. And whenever I go to see him he wakes up and wants to talk, which annoys Dandra, I can tell you. So I reckon I am doing him a favor by disappearing for a day or two. Anyway, I’m intrigued.”

“Thank you, Marwick,” Septimus said. “That would be a great help. Even when we get to the Port of the Singing Sands, we have absolutely no idea where to go from there.”

Darius hardly dared to speak, but he knew he could not possibly make things worse. “Um. Excuse me . . .” he said.

“What?” Beetle snapped.

“The girl, Kaznim. She said she lived in the desert in a tent with stars on it. If that’s any help?”

“A tent with stars on it . . .” Septimus mused, wondering why that sounded familiar.

“Yes. Her mother is an . . . er . . . Pothy Cary.”

Septimus suddenly made the connection. “Dandra!” he said. “*She* lived in a tent with stars. And Kaznim’s mother took it over. Dandra will know how to get there.”

Beetle was not so sure. “But don’t they move the tents around in deserts?” he asked. “It may not be in the same place now.”

Septimus was already hurrying along the corridor, heading for the wide white stairs. “It’s the only clue we’ve got! Wait here. I’ll be back with Dandra as soon as I can.”

“Right,” Marwick said as Septimus’s purple cloak disappeared around the corner. “We’d better get a few things together. We’ll need water, for a start.”

“I’ll get it!” Darius said. “Do you want it in water bottles you can carry?”

“Yes, we do.” Marwick smiled.

“I won’t be long,” said Darius, and he raced off along the corridor and clattered up the stairs, glad for any excuse to be away from the angry glare of his boss.

Beetle and Marwick watched him go.

“Don’t be too hard on the boy,” Marwick said.

“He broke the Promise,” Beetle replied grimly.

“Then you should give him a chance to mend it,” Marwick replied.

The yellow owl watched his Master running to the Wizard Tower. The languor of a full stomach began to overtake the owl and its eyes began to close. Its claws uncurled and a tiny tube of paper rolled down the slope of the roof and landed in the gutter. There it unfurled and a gust of wind picked it up and sent it fluttering down onto the pavement below.

As the light of the moon shone down on the piece of paper, the owl on the roof fell asleep. As it closed its eyes, the weakness of too many **Transformations** in too short a time overcame it. The owl-form left the jinnee and the long yellow figure of Jim Knee lay draped along the ridge of the roof. He rolled over, slipped off, and slid down into the large gutter that lay between the double-gabled Manuscriptorium roofs. And there he curled up and fell deep into hibernation.

Ten minutes later, Septimus and Dandra Draa came hurrying toward the Manuscriptorium. “I can’t believe that Alice would go off without saying anything,” Dandra was saying. “Something awful must have happened to her.”

Septimus was shaking his head. “I don’t know, Dandra. I really don’t know.”

The scrap of paper shining in the moonlight caught Septimus’s eye and he stopped to pick it up. “Well!” he gasped. “Another note. How extraordinary.” He passed it over to Dandra, who read it. The note said:

Dear Septimus,

We are going to get the Egg of the Orm. Jim Knee will explain and will tell you how to find us.

*Your Apprentice,
Alice TodHunter Moon*

“Oh my goodness!” Dandra gasped. “So where’s Jim Knee?” She put her hand on Septimus’s arm. “Septimus, you’ve *got* to ask him. We have to know where she is!”

Septimus shook his head. “Unfortunately, I have no idea where that jinnee has got to,” he said. “But at least I now have some idea where my Apprentice might be. With your help, Dandra, we’ll get to your old star tent, and with any luck we’ll find her there.”

Bemused, Dandra shook her head. “But how will Alice get there? How on earth does she know where to go?”

“My Apprentice is a PathFinder,” Septimus said. “I am beginning to realize that means she can go pretty much anywhere she wants to.” He smiled. “I suppose it’s a little like having a cat.”

“A *cat*?” Dandra said indignantly as she followed Septimus into the Manuscriptorium.

“You’re never quite sure where they go, or why. You just hope they come back to you.” Septimus looked at Tod’s note and smiled. “The only difference is, cats don’t send you regular updates.”

As the door to the Manuscriptorium swung closed, a loud snore came from above. But no one heard it. It was only the next day, when Colin Partridge went to investigate the strange noises on the roof, that Jim Knee was discovered, half frozen and delirious. He spent the rest of the winter in front of the fire on the big purple sofa in Septimus’s rooms—which was what he’d wanted in the first place.

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

Nighttime in the desert is hunting time. It is a time when small, soft-skinned creatures bury themselves in the sands and hope that nothing with teeth, claws or stings will come calling. But that night there were four creatures—not so small but relatively soft-skinned—who were about to brave the hunting ground.

The open desert spread out before them. Above, the clear night sky was alive with stars that seemed so vibrant and busy, they almost took away the loneliness of the empty sands ahead. A feeling of excitement began to creep over Tod. They had left the encampment behind and now stood at the beginning of the road that would take them to the Orm Egg—or to within sight of where it lay. All they had to do was follow the road as fast as they could.

The only thing that worried Tod now was if they were going to get to the Egg in time. “How many more grains to go through in the **Egg Timer**?” Tod asked Kaznim.

Kaznim took the **Egg Timer** from her pocket and peered at it, taking care to hold it away from Tod. The grains of silver shone like tiny points of light and there were only three left, which Kaznim knew meant that—depending on how soon the next grain was due to move—there was at the most nine hours to go until the Egg hatched. And possibly, if a grain was about to move, only six.

“Let’s have a look,” Oskar said.

Kaznim closed her hand tightly over the **Egg Timer**. “It loses energy in the dark,” she said. “You can see it in the morning.”

“So how many grains are left?” Tod asked again.

“Six,” Kaznim lied.

“And how many to each hour?” Oskar asked.

Kaznim was pleased to be able to tell the truth this time. “One goes through every three hours,” she said.

“So . . . it looks like the hatching is set for sometime tomorrow evening, then,” Tod said. “That’s good. It gives us lots of time.”

Oskar liked to have things planned out. “Time to steal the Egg?” he asked.

“No, time to get there,” Tod said. “I’ve been thinking. We don’t have to steal the Egg, all we have to do is be there. As long as we make sure that one of us is the first person the Orm sees when it comes out of the Egg so that we stop it from **Imprinting** on . . .” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “*You-know-who.*”

Oskar grinned. “Wouldn’t it be great to have a little Orm **Imprinting** you? I hope it chooses me.”

“Don’t be so stupid, Oskie,” Ferdie snapped. “It’s not going to be that easy. Oraton-Marr is not just going to stand aside and say, ‘Oh, hello, Oskar Sarn, do you want an Orm all of your own? Go ahead, be my guest and have mine,’ is he? Really, Oskar, think about it. This is not going to be a picnic.”

Tod knew that Ferdie and Oskar picked fights when they were nervous. She tried to be peacemaker. “It’s not going to be easy, that’s true,” she said, “but we can do it. Tribe of Three, remember?” Tod made the Tribe of Three sign and Ferdie and Oskar returned it.

“Time to go,” Tod said.

The *Wiz* and the *Beetle* sat patiently in the starlight, two steeds waiting for their riders. No one spoke. The two riders took their places, then Kaznim joined Tod, and Ferdie joined Oskar.

“I hope Oraton-Marr doesn’t have a sled,” Oskar said.

“The sorcerer uses **Magyk** and camels,” Kaznim said. “But they say, in the olden days, the Red Queen had a beautiful SandRider.”

“Okay,” Tod said, a little nervously. “Ready?”

“Ready!” said Oskar.

Tod leaned forward on the *Wiz*. “Go!” she whispered. The SandRider **Charm** kicked in.

The *Wiz* led the way with the *Beetle* close behind. Both sleds traveled along the tightly packed sand of the road as though they had never known a day's snow. Tod thought the *Wiz* ran even better on sand. She felt more in control and the *Wiz* had a sense of power that she had not been aware of before. It was as though the sled knew that a great expanse of sand was waiting and it longed to run free. For a sled that had always been constrained either by tunnels or tracks, this was heady stuff.

Behind the *Wiz* ran the *Beetle*, edgy and energetic. Oskar felt exhilarated. He loved sand dunes in the same way that Tod loved the sea, and suddenly he was able to travel across them at a speed he had only dreamed of. But Oskar knew that for now Tod must lead the way, so he contented himself with daydreaming about arriving at the very moment when the Orm Egg was hatching. He imagined drawing up on the *Beetle* in a shower of sand just in time to see the tiny creature—which he knew looked like a dragon—come fluttering out of the Egg and land on his hand. He thought how they would gaze into each other's eyes and be together forever. And then, Oskar thought, he would take his Orm for breathtaking rides through the desert and—

“Hey!” Tod yelled. “Stop!”

Oskar's dreams came to an abrupt halt. In front the *Wiz* had stopped and he was about to crash into it. He slewed the *Beetle* out of the way and skidded to a halt. “What's up?” he asked anxiously.

In answer Tod pointed to a fork in the road. Kaznim got off the *Wiz* and stood looking up at the sky.

“Kaznim's not sure which way to go,” Tod said. “She's working it out from the stars.”

But Kaznim had no need to look at the stars—she knew exactly which road led to the star tent. She was in fact struggling with her conscience. Kaznim was well aware that she had promised to take Tod, Oskar and Ferdie to the Orm Egg—and she would honor that promise. What she had not said was *when* they would get there. Kaznim knew she could not risk going home until she was sure that the Egg had hatched. Only then would the sorcerer return her baby sister to her mother. Kaznim sneaked the **Egg Timer** from her pocket, hoping that maybe another grain had gone through. Then she need not deceive anyone anymore and could lead them straight to the tent along the right-hand fork. They would arrive in about four hours'

time, and by then the Orm would have already hatched and **Imprinted** the sorcerer, but that would not be her fault. To Kaznim's disappointment there were still three grains of silver left.

"Kaznim?" Tod called across. "Which way?"

Kaznim delayed her answer for just a little while longer. The right-hand road led straight home. They would be back at the star tent in under four hours. The left went deep into the Dunes of Kuniun—sand lion territory. Kaznim fought down her desire to go home and also to be honest with three people she had come to like. But she could not. If she wished her baby sister to still be alive when she finally returned, she had no choice.

"Left," Kaznim replied with a heavy heart. "We take the left."

SAND LIONS

The *Wiz* and the *Beetle* traveled side by side along the wide, smooth road. All were silent as they headed toward the Dunes of Kuniun, each occupied with their own thoughts. Tod and Ferdie were focused on the task ahead, Oskar still daydreaming about “his” Orm. Kaznim was scared: for her sister and of her companions working out what she had done. But her most pressing terror was of sand lions.

The sleds were going beautifully. They ran smooth and fast, and although they were now beginning to climb up into the dunes, the soft *shish-shish-shish* of sand beneath the sleds’ runners felt so right that Tod found it strange to think that the *Wiz* also ran on snow.

As they climbed higher the cold night air began to bite, and they took turns to lead so that one was always sheltered. On the back of Oskar’s sled, Ferdie found her eyes closing with weariness, but on the back of the *Wiz*, Kaznim was wide-awake and very nervous. Once she thought she heard a distant roar. Tod heard it too. She slowed down and said to Oskar, “Did you hear that?”

“No,” said Oskar. He was lying. He knew how scared Ferdie was of strange creatures and he saw no reason to panic her. And so they traveled on beneath the canopy of stars, steadily up into the wide expanse of the Dunes of Kuniun.

After many miles the track had petered out and the sleds were now traveling through unmarked dunes, guided entirely by Kaznim’s directions. The waning full moon was dropping down toward the horizon, its light silvering the sand that rose and fell before them like waves, the sleds

flowing up and down the slopes like boats riding the surf. As they crested yet another rise, Tod drew to a halt and surveyed the scene. She had expected by now to be able to see tents in the distance, but she could see nothing but empty, rolling dunes. A niggles of worry that had been growing ever since the track had petered out became impossible to ignore—*Where were they?*

She turned around to Kaznim. “I thought you said when the road ended you could see your tent.”

Kaznim was flustered. “No, I didn’t,” she said. “It goes to the dunes. And *then* you see the tent.”

“That’s not what you said.” Oskar leaned across to the *Wiz*. “And anyway, we are in the dunes now and I can’t see any tents at all.”

“Neither can I,” Ferdie added for good measure.

“So where *is* your tent?” Tod asked.

“It will very soon be under the Palm of Dora. Like I said,” Kaznim replied. She pointed to a constellation straight ahead of them. “Over there.”

“That’s not the Palm of Dora,” Oskar said.

“Yes it is,” Kaznim insisted.

“No, it’s not,” Oskar shot back. “I know where it is, and it’s not there.”

Kaznim was trapped. There was nothing she could do but lie, and keep on lying. “Yes, it *is*,” she repeated.

Tod was getting a bad feeling about this. “Oskie,” she said, “do you know which constellation the Palm of Dora is?”

“Yep,” said Oskar. “It’s over there.” He pointed to the west. “It’s the one with five stars in a vertical row with a semicircle of stars above.”

“Oh, you mean the Anchor!”

“Yep,” Oskar said. “That is exactly what I mean.”

“Well, there is no way we are heading for that, is there?” Tod turned to Kaznim. “We should have taken the right-hand fork,” she said. And then, as Kaznim refused to meet her eyes, Tod suddenly understood what had happened. “But you knew that, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t,” Kaznim countered. She had told so many lies now that another did not seem to matter.

“Are you saying that Kaznim has deliberately taken us the wrong way?” Ferdie asked anxiously.

“That’s what it looks like to me,” Tod said stonily.

Everyone fell quiet—that was what it looked like to Oskar and Ferdie too. And then, the silence of the night was broken by a sound that no one wanted to hear: a long, low growl.

Sand lions, Oskar mouthed rather unnecessarily.

Then came another growl—this from a different direction.

Oskar had a talent for reading the land and all creatures within it. Like a sand snake, he slipped from his sled and put his ear to the ground. He listened to the sound of the sand and the pad of paws, and he knew it was bad. Very slowly he moved back onto the sled. “We’re surrounded,” he whispered. “But if we stay totally still I don’t think they’ll go for us. They need movement to judge their attack.”

Kaznim stared at Oskar in horror. This was her fault—and she knew they knew it. Kaznim felt more alone than she ever had in her life, even more than when she had been waiting outside the Sick Bay. At least then she was only being ignored by strangers. Now she was surrounded by a pride of sand lions in the company of three people who had just realized that she had tricked them. A horrible thought came into Kaznim’s mind. There was an easy way for the others to escape; all they had to do was to push her off the sled and leave her behind. The sand lions would find her and they wouldn’t bother to go hunting anything else that night. Kaznim’s fingers closed around her opal pebble **Charm**—she still had her **UnSeen**. But even as she tried to comfort herself with that, she knew it would be useless. Sand lions hunted by scent, not vision. It was then, in the darkness of Kaznim’s pocket, that the penultimate grain of silver in the top of the **Egg Timer** wandered through to join its friends, leaving behind a lonely singleton to ponder what it had done to offend all the other grains. There were a mere three hours left until the Orm Egg hatched.

“Oskie,” Tod was whispering. “We have to make a break for it. Which way?”

Oskar knew there was only one way out. “Along the ridge. Toward the moon,” he whispered. “We go fast—*really* fast. There are lions on either side, but I think they are too far down to get us at first pounce.”

“What about second pounce?” Ferdie whispered.

“We don’t let that happen. Okay?”

“We’ll go on the count of three,” Tod said. She turned to Kaznim. “Hold on really tight,” she told her. “This is going to be *fast*. If you fall off I won’t

be able to come back to pick you up, do you understand?”

“Yes, Tod,” Kaznim meekly replied. “I understand.”

Tod began the countdown: “One . . . two . . . three!”

The standing-start practices for the sled race stood them in good stead. The *Wiz* and the *Beetle* shot along the ridge in a shower of sand that flew into the air and landed on the lions lying in wait on either side. The animals were so shocked that they did not get a chance for a first pounce—let alone, as Ferdie had feared, a second. She risked a glance back and saw not the lions themselves—who were perfectly camouflaged—but their moon shadows, long and dark, loping effortlessly after them. “They’re coming after us!” Ferdie shouted in dismay.

Oskar had hoped that the shock of their escape would confuse the pride and they would not bother to follow. But he did not know that the pride had not eaten for days and the heady smell of human cut through all confusion. One thing Oskar did know was that, unlike their cousins, the great lions of the plains, sand lions had tremendous stamina. They were small, lithe creatures, built for traveling long distances to find prey in the emptiness of the desert. There was no hope of them tiring fast and giving up the chase. Oskar knew they must outrun them. “We have to go faster!” he yelled. “*Much* faster!”

Tod could feel the reserves of power within the *Wiz*; she knew the sled could easily go faster, but she was not sure that the *Beetle* could. And there was no way she was going to leave Oskar and Ferdie behind. “You go first, Oskie!” she called back. “Go as fast as you can. We’ll follow!”

The *Beetle* drew ahead and once more the two riders were in a race—but this time it was for something a little more important than the Apprentices’ Cup.

TRANSPORT

Oraton-Marr stood on the rooftop of the Hospitable Gard looking at his **Egg Timer**. With a sense of excitement he saw that now there was only one remaining grain of silver. His Orm Egg would hatch in three hours' time. He put his **Enlarging Glass** to his eye and scanned the sky. He was searching for the Palm of Dora.

In the courtyard below, a camel from the Red Queen's stables, accompanied by the Red Queen's spy authentically swathed in smelly camel-driver robes, waited impatiently. Oraton-Marr was not quite as stupid as Marissa had assumed. He had no intention whatsoever of taking the camel to the Orm Egg. The Red Queen's heavy hints at the banquet that she knew of his "buried treasure" in the desert had put him on guard. He had had no choice but to accept her offer of a camel and guide, but he had no intention of using them.

While the spy irritably scratched her camel-flea bites and the camel dribbled down her neck, Oraton-Marr located the Palm of Dora. He moved the **Glass** down the vertical line of stars and beneath he saw the tiny but unmistakable shape of the star-strewn tent. He fixed the position in his mind and put the **Enlarging Glass** away.

Right now, he thought, his sister would be making the long trek from their ship to the Egg tent. With her would be the Mitza woman and the hostage toddler brat. Oraton-Marr smiled to himself. He liked to think he was a man of his word, and he would prove it by returning the child as promised—but only if all went as he wished it and he got his Orm. If the Orm did not hatch successfully or the creature did not **Imprint** him, he

would at least have the pleasure of drowning the child in the pool beside her mother's tent. The child was his guarantee that one way or another, there would be something he would enjoy about the coming day.

With these happy thoughts, Oraton-Marr began his **Magyk**. He narrowed his dark green eyes and fixed his gaze on the exact point on the horizon just below the Palm of Dora and prepared himself. While it was not strictly necessary to see the place to which he was planning to **Transport**, on such an important occasion the sorcerer was taking no chances. He focused his mind on the flat rock beside the pool. Thirty seconds later all that remained of the sorcerer on the rooftop was a lingering purple haze and an unsettling aura of smugness.

SPEED

The average speed of a sand lion in for the long chase is thirty-five miles an hour, although it is perfectly possible for it to top fifty miles an hour in a quick spurt. The lions now settled into their hunting rhythm, each leader dropping back after some minutes to allow a fresher lion to take its place and keep the pride's pace steady.

The lions easily followed the sleds as they ran along the top of the ridge, and every time she glanced around, Tod could see that little by little the pride was gaining on them. But there was nothing she could do. There was no way she was going to take the *Wiz* up to full speed and leave Oskar and Ferdie behind.

Oskar did not glance back; he could feel the padding of the lions steadily growing stronger and he had no wish to see them as well. Ferdie, however, could hardly take her eyes from the scene behind. The dark shapes of the lions and the glassy glint from their eyes terrified her; she held on tightly to Oskar and wished she could do something—*anything*—to make the *Beetle* go faster. And then it occurred to Ferdie that she could. If Oskar could will the *Beetle* faster, then surely she could too.

Ferdie remembered what Oskar had excitedly told her when he had first been picked to ride in the Apprentice Race. "You have to imagine that you actually *are* the sled," he had said. Ferdie knew that Oskar had expected her to laugh at him. But she had simply asked him how he did it, because she wanted to know. There was so much Ferdie wanted to know. Her brother, like Tod, was learning so many new things and Ferdie sometimes felt a little

bit left behind—but there was no way that she was going to let that happen now.

And so, saying nothing to Oskar, Ferdie focused on the small wooden sled beneath her as it traveled steadily along the sandy ridge, closely tailed by the *Wiz*. In her mind, Ferdie became the *Beetle*. She felt the slip of the sand beneath her, the resistance of the cold night air before her; she became fast and sleek, full of energy, power and speed.

To Oskar’s shock and delight, with a tremendous kick, the *Beetle* suddenly shot off, spraying sand over a surprised Tod. Ferdie and Oskar felt as though they were flying. Far below, the desert lay before them like the ocean; above, the immense indigo sky seemed to sing a high, thin tune as the stars whistled by. Only the greatest willpower stopped Ferdie from shrieking with exhilaration as the *Beetle* reached the end of the ridge and went barreling down the slope, heading for the wide plains lying before them.

At the foot of the dune, Oskar slowed the sled to allow the *Wiz* to catch up. His eyes were shining with excitement. With Kaznim clinging on to the back, covered in sand, Tod brought the *Wiz* alongside.

“Oskie . . . that was brilliant!” she said, breathless. “I never knew the *Beetle* could go so *fast!*”

Oskar grinned. “Neither did I!” he laughed.

Ferdie just smiled. “Look at the lions,” she said, pointing to the top of the dune.

Lined up along the ridge, silhouetted against the sky, was the pride of sand lions looking mournfully at the two sleds. They were exhausted. Even the tasty scent of four small humans was not enough to risk good energy on a chase they were never going to win.

Twenty-one pairs of mirrored eyes watched the *Beetle* and the *Wiz* set off at a steady speed across the desert plain, their course set for the Palm of Dora.



PART XII

ONE HOUR TO HATCHING

THE DRAGON ON THE DUNE

O*raton-Marr arrived exactly where he had planned.* He stood for some minutes to allow the effects of his **Transport** to fade and as the last wisps of purple evaporated into the night air, he walked over to the encampment. He opened the door flap of the Egg tent and stepped inside.

The Egg Boy jumped to his feet and stood at attention. He had been dreading this moment and had not slept all night. “All in order, sir,” he said.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Oraton-Marr snapped—secretly gratified that not only was the Egg Boy still afraid of him but that he did appear to have done a good job.

In the shadows of the tent, the Apprentice Mysor watched warily. No one wanted the Egg hatched successfully more than he, so that the sorcerer would go away and leave them alone. Even so Mysor disliked seeing the sorcerer getting what he wanted. He watched Oraton-Marr kneel down, lift the furs from the Egg and place two proprietorial hands on it and run them across the Egg’s smooth, leathery surface. When they reached around to the back the long, questing fingers found what they were looking for.

“The Egg Tooth bulge,” Oraton-Marr whispered excitedly. He looked at the Egg Boy and gave a thin smile. “You have done well.” The Egg Boy almost fainted with relief.

Oraton-Marr knew that the most prudent course of action was to keep the Orm Egg within the tent, so that when the little Orm emerged it could not escape. But Oraton-Marr had not put in years of planning, violence and intimidation to have no one witness his moment of triumph. He would never admit it, but he wanted his sister to see how clever her big brother really was.

And so, as dawn began to break over the desert, Oraton-Marr watched Mysor and the Egg Boy stagger out of the tent with the Orm Egg and lay it gently on the sand. Then, under instructions, they lit a fire on the flat rock

beside the pool and brewed coffee. Oraton-Marr settled down to gaze at the Egg and enjoy the moment. Soon the key to an endless supply of lapis lazuli would be in his grasp.

The smell of coffee woke the Apothecary, who had only just fallen into a fitful sleep. She emerged from the star-strewn tent, haggard with exhaustion and fear for her two daughters. She saw the sorcerer sitting beside the fire, drinking his—or to be accurate, her—coffee. In the sand beside him was the hateful Egg, still unhatched, but clearly not for much longer. Even from a distance, Karamander could see the lump of the Egg Tooth bulging in the smooth ovoid.

On his last visit to the star-strewn tent, Oraton-Marr had gleefully informed Karamander that he now had custody of Kaznim too. At first Karamander had been ecstatic to hear that Kaznim was actually alive, but her joy had soon been replaced with fear for her daughter's safety in the clutches of such a wicked man. Karamander Draa stood still and took three deep, slow breaths of cold morning air. She must calm down, she told herself. She must *not* run screaming at the sorcerer, punch him in his smug face and demand the return of her children—she must *not*. She had only to wait a little longer and all would be well. The Egg would hatch, Oraton-Marr would get his stupid Orm and then he would give her back her daughters. Wouldn't he?

From the top of the long dune, Spit Fyre watched the proceedings below. He had not eaten for twelve weeks, and even though a dragon is a beast built for endurance and he still had reserves left, Spit Fyre was not feeling his best. He didn't look too good, either. He was no longer the shining green dragon that had once glittered in the skies above the Castle. Sand had settled over him, sticking to his scales, which had been dried and roughened by the sun, so that his brilliant color and sheen had long gone and he now looked as though he were carved from sandstone. The only glimpse of color was in his eyes, a deep emerald ringed with red.

Some weeks previously a rumor had spread around the encampment that the dragon had turned to stone. Spit Fyre had heard the mutterings and decided to encourage the idea by moving only at night and making sure he resumed the same position at daybreak. One of Oraton-Marr's guards had eventually ventured up for a closer look. Spit Fyre had remained immobile

and had not reacted even when the guard had given him a vicious jab in the belly with the end of his charred **FireStick**. The guard had returned with the news that the dragon had indeed turned to stone. And on his next visit Oraton-Marr had taken the glory of the awesome feat of turning a dragon into stone.

From his vantage point Spit Fyre now saw all. Below to his right, he saw the Orm Egg lying on the sand, surrounded by people whose hopes and fears rested on its hatching. To his left on the plain that stretched all the way to the Port of the Singing Sands, Spit Fyre saw a small group of people making their way toward him, a long trail of foot- and hoofprints stretching out behind. A large woman swathed in blue rode a small, grumpy camel. Behind her came a dumpy woman on a donkey carrying a small, sleeping child upon her back and in front walked a man with a long stave, leading the way.

Spit Fyre also was aware of two fast-moving objects on the plains some distance behind him. There was something familiar about them. They had, he thought, a feel of the Castle to them. He had at first wondered if it was his much-loved **Imprintor**, Septimus. But as they drew closer he could tell that sadly, it was not Septimus. Spit Fyre was intrigued. There was an air of **Magyk** about them and they were hurtling toward him at a surprising speed, but the dragon resisted the temptation to turn and look. He must remain immobile for now. He did not want to draw attention to himself. Not yet.

With an unblinking eye, Spit Fyre watched the man lead the camel and donkey with their burdens up the dune. They stopped at the top and the travelers looked at him warily. The one in blue stared hard. “So he *did* do it,” Spit Fyre heard her say in an awed voice. “He really has turned a dragon to stone.”

Spit Fyre felt the near-irresistible urge to yawn that always came before a breath of **Fyre**. How he would have loved to have aimed a blast at the shiny blue one and seen it shrivel up to a crisp. He put the thought from his mind and allowed his right eye to follow the group as they made their way down the dune toward the little group gathered around the Egg.

The minutes passed slowly. After spending so long waiting so very patiently, Spit Fyre found it hard to contain his excitement. He longed to fly down and retrieve the Egg *right now* but he dared not risk it. He knew he was weak from lack of food and stiff from lack of movement—he could not

risk a fight that he may well not win. His advantage must be in surprise and perfect timing. He had to get it right the first time. There would be no second chance.

THE PRODIGAL RETURNS

A lightening of the sky in the east told Tod that the night was nearly gone. The Palm of Dora was beginning to fade but in its place, at the foot of the vertical line of stars, was the dark shape of a tent. Sitting behind Tod, Kaznim saw the same. A thrill of excitement ran through her at the sight of her home, quickly followed by the terror of what she might find there.

With the threat of the sand lions gone, the sleds were now traveling at a comfortable pace. The sand no longer stung the riders' eyes and cut at their faces, and Tod and Oskar could actually see where they were going. They had now reached the beginnings of the gentle swell in the sand that rose up to form the ridge of the long dune above the star-strewn tent. A short conference between the riders—in which Kaznim took no part—led to the decision to head to the top of the dune. Tod hoped to be able to see the Egg from there. Oskar hoped for a quick descent, giving them the advantage of surprise.

Ferdie was keeping watch on Kaznim. She did not trust the girl at all, but she could not entirely blame her. Ferdie knew that if the safety of her own little brother was at stake, she suspected that she might well do as Kaznim had done.

They ascended to the ridge of the long dune and coasted quietly along the top. Soon the stone-still shape of Spit Fyre came into view. Tod turned to Oskar and Ferdie. "There's a dragon up ahead," she whispered.

"A stone dragon," Kaznim said. And then wished she hadn't. How stupid could she be? It would be much better if they were too afraid of the dragon to go any farther. She quickly added, "It belongs to the sorcerer. It is

there to protect the Egg. It will come alive if anyone but the sorcerer **Imprints** the Orm.”

Tod, Ferdie and Oskar exchanged glances. No one knew whether to believe Kaznim. “Do we risk the dragon?” Tod whispered.

“If it’s stone, then surely we’re safe,” Ferdie said. “It can’t become a live dragon in just a few seconds . . . can it?”

Tod was not sure. She had heard many things about **Darke Magyk** and not all of them made sense. But a sudden change in the balance of the *Wiz* and a gasp from Ferdie drove the conundrum of stone dragons entirely from her mind—Kaznim was off and running fast.

Skidding, sliding, hurling herself forward, Kaznim took the steepest part of the dune, which was too sheer for any sled. “Ammaa!” she screamed out, her voice piercing the silence. “Ammaa! *Ammaaaa!*” The sounds fell away as Kaznim hurtled out of sight.

The Tribe of Three stared at one another in dismay. Their only advantage was surprise and now that was gone. There was no doubt in their minds that Kaznim would very soon be telling everyone exactly who was on the dune—and why.

Throughout their long ride across the sands, Tod had been thinking about what they would do if they were seen too early. She knew they needed a backup plan, and her brief stint as Oraton-Marr’s prisoner had given her an idea, but it was not a pleasant one. It was to use only as a last resort—and the last resort had arrived unexpectedly fast. “I’m going after her,” Tod said.

“We’re coming too,” said Ferdie at once.

“No,” Tod said. “It won’t work if you come too.”

“Why not?” Oskar asked.

“Trust me, it *won’t*. Okay?”

“Okay . . .” Ferdie and Oskar agreed reluctantly.

“We’re here if you need us,” Ferdie said.

“Ready and waiting,” added Oskar.

Tod set off on the *Wiz* with a heavy heart. She took a diagonal route across the face of the long dune, keeping well below the dragon. Halfway down the dune, the encampment came into view. She saw the faded silver stars stitched across the roof of a large, circular tent. She saw the smaller tents gathered around it. She saw the dark, mirrored water of the pool

beneath the long dune, the flat rock in front of the pool on which a fire was burning and people were gathered around. And then she saw the Orm Egg for the very first time—as large as a small child, deep blue, lying quietly in a dip in the sand, unaware of all the fuss it had caused. And was still causing. A flash of light from the rising sun touched the surface of the Orm Egg, which shimmered like water. Tod caught her breath with excitement. The Egg was beautiful. And even better, *it was unhatched*.

The *Wiz* continued its downward path toward the encampment. It felt so wrong to be coasting along in full view of everyone, but Tod steeled herself to act the part she had set herself to play—and to act it well. Ahead of her she could see another party on a small camel and a donkey stumbling down the long dune, and as the *Wiz* drew slowly closer, Tod’s heart began to race with fear. She was heading toward two people she had hoped never to see again—the Lady and her tormenter of old, her mother’s stepsister, Aunt Mitza. Tod’s instincts screamed at her to turn the *Wiz* around *right now* and head away as fast as she could. But she resisted. She must keep going. For the sake of all the people she loved, she must get to the Orm Egg and then, when it hatched, she must **Imprint** it. That was all that mattered. And so Tod let the *Wiz* saunter nonchalantly down the long diagonal, drawing ever closer to the nest of vipers below.

Suddenly Tod saw the tiny figure of Kaznim Na-Draa hurtle out of the shadows behind the star-covered tent. Her shouts of “Ammaa! Ammaa!” were closely followed by her mother’s answering screams of joy. Tod saw a woman in red robes lift Kaznim into the air and swing her around and around in utter delight. An unexpected twinge of sadness for what she had lost when her own mother died caught at Tod. She pushed the feeling away and allowed the *Wiz* to trundle on.

And then, as Tod knew it surely would, the sled caught the eye of Oraton-Marr.

AN ORM IS BORN

The *Wiz* coasted to a halt beside the Egg of the Orm. Oraton-Marr looked down at Tod with an expression of annoyance. “Where have you been?” he snapped.

Hating the thought of what she was about to do, Tod forced herself into role. She got off the *Wiz* and stood meekly before Oraton-Marr. “I am sorry,” she said. “I disappeared from your tower by mistake. I was . . . I was bored so I was playing around with some **Magyk**. It was a stupid thing to do, because I really do want to be your Apprentice. It is such a wonderful opportunity.”

Oraton-Marr was impressed by Tod’s acquisition and mastery of a **SandRider** and her obvious talent for **Magyk**. His arrogance was such that he found it very easy to believe that Tod truly did want to be his Apprentice. “It is indeed a wonderful opportunity for you, Apprentice,” he told Tod. “However, you are very late. I shall expect better timekeeping in future.”

“I came as fast as I could,” Tod said. “And you were hard to find.”

“Do not answer back!” Oraton-Marr snapped. He glared at those gathered around the Egg—Mysor, the Egg Boy, the three guards and an open-mouthed Kaznim, clutching her mother’s hand. Oraton-Marr now addressed them equally severely. “The Orm Egg is about to hatch. When it does you will all look away. You will *not* catch its gaze. If the Orm **Imprints** on anyone else I shall *kill them*. Do you understand?”

There was silence. They understood.

Oraton-Marr took advantage of having an Apprentice. He left Tod beside the Egg—with the instruction to fetch him at once if the Egg Tooth

broke through—and he went to meet the party on the camel and donkey who were heading wearily toward the tents. Oraton-Marr greeted them and irritably beckoned the guards to help Drone get his sister off the camel.

Horribly fascinated to see her step-aunt again, Tod stole a few glances in their direction, but as Aunt Mitza waddled toward the fire by the pool, Tod stared stonily down at the Egg and refused to catch her eye.

With much fuss the Lady was settled on some cushions from Karamander's tent. Karamander's sleeping baby daughter was lifted from the papoose on Aunt Mitza's back. Oraton-Marr instructed Aunt Mitza to stand beside the pool with the child in her arms and then he addressed them all. "If anyone gets between me and my Orm—*anyone*—Mitza Draddenmora will drown the child immediately."

Karamander suppressed a gasp, but Kaznim did not suppress anything. "No!" she screamed. "No! Not Bubba!"

"I will *not* have any disturbance," Oraton-Marr told Karamander. "Take your daughter to your tent and stay there." Karamander led Kaznim away and as they disappeared into the star-strewn tent, an excited cry came from the sorcerer. "Breakthrough!" he shouted out. "Breakthrough!"

Like a baby's tooth pushing through the gum, a white point gleamed wetly at the top of the bump on the Egg. It was the Egg Tooth. It had pushed its way through the leathery skin of the Egg, and a serrated edge now revealed itself. Slowly, the Egg Tooth of the Orm began to cut its way along the length of the Egg.

"All of you, turn around! Close your eyes!" Oraton-Marr barked.

His sister, his servant, Drone, Aunt Mitza, the three guards, Mysor and the Egg Boy obediently turned away toward the shadow of the dune and the darkness of the pool.

Oraton-Marr's hand descended on Tod's shoulder. "As my Apprentice, you will stay with me beside the Egg," Oraton-Marr said. "You will close your eyes until I tell you otherwise. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Tod said meekly.

A tense silence fell. Head bowed, Tod discovered that she could raise her eyelids just enough to see the whiteness of the Egg Tooth as it sawed back and forth, its sharp teeth glinting in the firelight. She saw Oraton-Marr crouch down, put his hands on the Egg and lean over it, like a small child keeping a favorite toy for himself.

The Egg Tooth slowly cut a slit along the length of the Egg, then it stopped moving. It wobbled for a moment, then it fell out like a milk tooth and lay wetly on the sand. For a few long seconds the Egg was still and all was suspended, motionless, while Oraton-Marr stared into the Egg, seeking the gaze of the baby Orm.

Like a midwife at a difficult birth, Oraton-Marr was now leaning right over the Egg, intent on the stirrings inside. Safe in the knowledge that the sorcerer's whole being was fixated upon the Orm, Tod dared to open her eyes a little more. She saw that the cut along the length of the Egg was beginning to gape and beneath she glimpsed something moving. Tod knew that any second now the Orm would hatch.

Her heart beating fast, Tod readied herself. As soon as the Orm emerged, she would throw herself at the sorcerer and send him reeling. She would **Imprint** the Orm and then . . . Tod remembered Bubba clutched in Aunt Mitza's iron grasp beside the pool. She swallowed hard. She could not think about what would happen next.

A thin wail of pain came suddenly from Bubba—Aunt Mitza had pinched the child to stop her wriggling. And with the wail, Tod's resolution evaporated. If Bubba drowned it would be because of her actions. *What should she do?* Tod no longer knew. She wished that Ferdie and Oskar were with her. Or Septimus. Or Dandra. She needed to talk about what was right. But there was no time for that. She was on her own.

Tod was not quite as alone as she thought. After some discussion, Ferdie and Oskar had decided that whatever Tod might have said, she needed backup. They were now creeping through the shadows at the foot of the star-strewn tent and the Orm Egg had just come into view.

Tod's there, Oskar said to Ferdie in PathFinder signs.

Is she okay? Ferdie signed.

So far was Oskar's reply. And then he added, *I'm going to go for the Orm.*

Ferdie frowned. *Tod said to let her do it on her own,* she replied. *Anyway, they'll see you coming.*

No they won't, Oskar signed. *They're facing the other way. And he told them to close their eyes.* With that Oskar set off.

Petrified, Ferdie watched Oskar pad noiselessly across the sand, heading for the Egg. Not one person reacted. She saw him reach Tod and blithely confident, she saw him tug at Tod's tunic. Surprised, Tod swung around. Oraton-Marr caught the movement and glanced up.

And then it happened.

There was a flash of brilliant blue and a glistening, wet tail flipped out of the Egg. Oraton-Marr grabbed hold of it and pulled. Oskar was shocked. It was cruel to pull a creature out of its egg before it was ready. But Oraton-Marr did not care—he had the tail of the Orm in his own hands. The sorcerer leaned back to get more traction, and pulled as hard as he could.

“Don't just stand there, Apprentice,” he snarled. “Help me pull! And you, boy,” he snapped at Oskar. “Pull!”

“But you'll hurt it,” Oskar protested.

“Rubbish!” Oraton-Marr grunted with the effort. “It's an Orm, for goodness' sake. It eats *rock*.”

But Oraton-Marr *was* hurting the Orm. Its tail felt as though it was being wrenched from its body, and the little Orm, still inside its Egg, quite reasonably became convinced that something was trying to eat it. It switched into attack mode.

No one wants to be near a young Orm in attack mode—let alone holding its tail. Suddenly the casing of the Egg flew apart as though an explosion had happened from within. Oraton-Marr went staggering backward but he did not let go of the tail. The Orm—five feet of slippery, spiky, wriggling, snapping fury went flying through the air and arced up, taking Oraton-Marr with it. As it went, its little wing bones began to flap and the soft membrane between them opened out like a parachute. But the dead weight hanging from its tail was pulling it down and so the Orm did the only thing it could. It dropped its tail. Oraton-Marr plummeted to the ground and lay senseless on the sand, a cold blue tail clutched to his chest.

The Lady heard the thud. She sneaked a look, staggered to her feet and set off toward her brother. “Orrie, Orrie!” she screamed.

Tod and Oskar raced after the Orm, which, with no tail to balance it, was flying erratically away, dipping and soaring. “Hey!” Oskar yelled. “Hey! Ormie, Ormie! Look at me! *Look at me!*”

Karamander Draa rushed from her tent. She saw the sorcerer unconscious on the ground and the woman in blue hovering over him like a

giant, predatory butterfly. She ignored them and raced to the pool. The woman with Bubba wheeled around and Karamander saw the flicker of fear in her eyes as she strode toward her. She took her baby with no resistance whatsoever. Then she turned her back on the woman and walked quickly away to the tent. “Kaznim!” she yelled as she went. “Come here. Take Bubba, please!” Kaznim came running and in a moment she had her baby sister in her arms and was watching her mother stride over to the stricken sorcerer.

Karamander Draa had come prepared. She knelt down beside Oraton-Marr, elbowed the Lady out of the way and sent her reeling backward onto the sand where she lay stranded like a beetle, yelling for help. No one came.

From her pocket Karamander took a vial of black liquid labeled “**HeadBanger**. Maximum strength.” With a long pipette she dropped the liquid into Oraton-Marr’s mouth, then she held his nose closed until he swallowed it. Brushing the sand off her robes, she stood up. “Get out of here,” she told the Lady, who was struggling to her feet. “And take your filthy sorcerer with you.”

“You’ve killed him! You’ve killed my Orrie!” his sister wailed.

“I do not kill,” Karamander told her. “I have sworn to uphold life. He is asleep. He will sleep for seven days. And when he wakes he will have the worst headache imaginable. I have something that will cure it if he wishes to ask me. But he will have to come to me in person and ask very, *very* nicely indeed.” With that she turned and went over to her Apprentice.

“Mysor,” she said. “See these people off the premises, will you?”

Mysor smiled. Nothing would please him more.

IMPRINTING THE ORM

The tailless Orm lurched away into the desert on a roller-coaster flight, heading toward the rising sun. Leaping uselessly up into the air, arms reaching for the Orm, Oskar followed the shimmering, oddly truncated scrap of blue. It was *his* Orm; he had loved it at first sight. No one else could **Imprint** it—*no one*.

From somewhere far behind him, Oskar heard Ferdie yell, “Watch out! Watch out!”

But Oskar—intent upon his dance with the Orm—took no notice. It was only when the shadow of the dragon fell across him that Oskar looked up and saw two great taloned feet heading, it seemed, straight for him.

It was not Oskar but the little Orm that Spit Fyre wanted. However, he got both. As Spit Fyre’s huge feet curled gently around the body of the Orm, Oskar at last timed his leap perfectly and grasped the Orm. It was slippery from the Egg and gritty with sand. Oskar wrapped his hands around its belly and the next thing he knew he was shooting vertically up in the air, looking into the irritated eye of a dragon. It was then that Oskar had second thoughts, but it was too late—he was now dangling fifty feet off the ground and far below he could see Ferdie and Tod running around like a couple of demented ants. He pushed away his fear and concentrated on the Orm. He must get it to look into his eyes. *He must*.

“Look at me!” Oskar yelled. “Please, Ormie, please. *Look at me!*”

But the little Orm took no notice. It only had eyes for its mother—or the creature the Orm assumed to be its mother: the creature who had rescued it from the animal that had tried to eat it and the other animals that had chased

it. The little Orm gazed into the eyes of Spit Fyre and **Imprinted** the dragon deep into its flat little reptile brain. It loved Spit Fyre forever. And then, realizing that one of the animals that had chased it was still holding on to it, it turned around and spat at it.

The Orm spit stung viciously. Oskar's hands flew up to his face and he fell.

Ferdie screamed.

Human-**Imprinted** dragons like Spit Fyre have a reflex called **Rider Retrieve**. Even though Oskar had merely hitched a ride on another passenger, the reflex kicked in. As Oskar plummeted to the ground, the dragon fell even faster. The split second before Oskar would have hit the ground, Spit Fyre let go of the Orm—which was perfectly capable of flying for itself—grabbed Oskar and took him up into the air.

Spit Fyre landed a shocked Oskar gently beside the fire and then flew off to catch the Orm. He plucked the tiny, spiky, gritty creature out of the air and, watched by all below—bar Oraton-Marr—Spit Fyre flew up and over the top of the long dune.

And then the sky was empty. Dragon and Orm were gone.

A LINE IN THE SAND

Back at the fire beside the pool, Tod and Ferdie stood staring into the sky, hoping that the dragon might come back. Oskar, stunned from his fall, lay beside the pool with his hands over his eyes. He was bereft: he had lost his Orm.

Tod, however, felt relieved. She may not have been about to return to Septimus in triumph with the Orm, but Bubba was alive and the sorcerer had not gotten the Orm either. It could, she told herself, have been a lot worse. As she squinted up into the blue of the sky, out of the corner of her eye Tod saw a small figure in red approaching. Kaznim came hesitantly, nervously even, and when she reached Tod she kneeled on the sand before her. "I betrayed you," she said. "I beg your forgiveness."

Tod felt embarrassed. No one had ever kneeled to her before. "Oh! Um . . . well, that's okay," Tod mumbled. "I understand why you did it. Please, please get up." And she pulled Kaznim to her feet.

Karamander joined them. "I wish to thank you all," she said. "Kaznim has told me what you did for her. My tent is your tent. Please come inside and rest." A sudden bellow from the camel interrupted her. "Excuse me for a moment," Karamander murmured. "My Apprentice needs some help."

The Tribe of Three watched Karamander and Kaznim help Mysor despatch their unwelcome guests. The Egg Boy was sent to look for Aunt Mitza, who had disappeared. The Lady was heaved onto the camel, and the unconscious Oraton-Marr, still clutching the Orm tail, was slung over the donkey with a distinct lack of respect. Suddenly Oskar was on his feet and

staggering away, heading for the donkey. Unsure of what harebrained plan Oskar might have now, Ferdie went after her twin.

Tod was watching Ferdie arguing with Oskar when a low, malevolent voice came from behind her. Tod swung around and found herself face-to-face with Aunt Mitza.

“Alice,” said Aunt Mitza. “We do bump into each other at the strangest of times, don’t we?”

Mitza reached out and placed a heavy hand on Tod’s shoulder. Tod swept it away as though swatting a fly. “Don’t touch me!” she growled.

“All right, I won’t.” Aunt Mitza chuckled. It seemed to Tod that she was laughing at a private joke. “Just like I never touched your mother,” she said.

“What do you mean . . . my *mother*?”

Aunt Mitza was enjoying the effect she was having. “I mean the dear, saintly, beautiful Cassandra who everyone loved, especially my Dan.”

“Your Dan?” Tod asked, puzzled.

Aunt Mitza leaned in so close to Tod’s face that she could smell fish on her step-aunt’s breath. “Your father. He was meant for me. Not *her*. She always took everything I wanted. *Everything*.” Aunt Mitza spat on the sand. She gave Tod a cold smile. “You want to watch out for sand flies, you know. There are some very nasty ones about. *Very nasty indeed*.”

Tod was too shocked to speak. She watched Aunt Mitza walk away, her broad back impervious to anything she might wish to hurl at her. Tod was still watching when Ferdie brought Oskar back. Oskar was clutching the Orm’s tail. “Oraton-Marr is disgusting,” Oskar was saying angrily. “He hurt a defenseless little Orm.”

Ferdie looked at Oskar’s singed eyebrows and the livid streak of red down his cheek where the Orm spit had burned him. “Not entirely defenseless, Oskie,” she said.

They watched Oraton-Marr’s entourage trail away up the dune. Tod stared long and hard at Aunt Mitza as she plodded wearily up the slope behind the camel. She could not get her step-aunt’s words out of her head. Tod was not sure of their exact meaning, but she was sure of one thing: they were laden with hate. There was no doubt about it—whatever Aunt Mitza had meant, she had not meant well.

NEW FAMILIES

Later in the morning Karamander Draa emerged from her tent after settling a disturbed Bubba down to sleep. She surveyed the group of young ones—Mysor, Tod, Ferdie, Oskar and Kaznim—who were playing a game in the sand involving twelve scooped-out dips and numerous pebbles, which Kaznim called “Village Chief.” It was causing much laughter and noise. Karamander smiled. She enjoyed the company of the young.

But Karamander was worried. The three children from the Land of the Castle were confident of getting home, but she knew it was not as simple as they thought. As soon as they stepped inside the Red City, they would be in grave danger. Karamander had seen Oraton-Marr’s entourage change direction at the top of the long dune and she knew they were now heading not for the port but for the Red City. She suspected that as soon as they reached it, the sorcerer’s minions would scuttle off to the Queen and seek revenge. Karamander knew that revenge was something the Red Queen understood very well.

Karamander watched Mysor laughing as he scooped up the last of the pebbles. She would let them have their fun for now, but she must plan what to do. The Castle children were not safe with her, but where could they go? The weary Apothecary retreated into the cool of her tent to think—and fell into a deep sleep.

She was awoken by screams.

Karamander leaped from her chair. Dreading what she would find, she threw back the door flap. She stared for some seconds, trying to make sense of the scene before her. There was a dragon. There was a tailless Orm

running around, snapping at everyone's ankles and a small boy with short fair tousled hair standing apart from the group, gazing at the tent with an expression of wonder. The rest of the young ones were bouncing up and down as though they were on springs—apart from Mysor, who was too cool to bounce. In the middle of the melee were three travel-stained young men and . . . *No, it couldn't be.*

But it was.

Karamander steadied herself. She had told Kaznim to make things right with Tod, and now it was her turn to do the same. Unnoticed by all, Karamander walked slowly across the sand. She reached the strangers and took a deep breath. "Dandra Draa," she said.

Dandra turned and bowed her head briefly. "Karamander Draa," she returned.

Karamander began to kneel, but Dandra caught hold of her hands and stopped her.

"Forgive me," Karamander said.

"Forgive *me*," replied Dandra.

There was silence and then Dandra said, "Your daughter Kaznim. I, er . . . I have something that belongs to her." And from a sling beneath her robes, Dandra brought out the tortoise.

Karamander smiled. All was indeed forgiven.

"So *this* is where you got to," Septimus was saying to Tod. "I suppose I shall have to get used to my PathFinder Apprentice turning up in strange places."

Tod looked sheepish. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought it was the best hope of getting the Orm. But it didn't work quite as I planned."

Septimus smiled. "You will find that things rarely do." He looked over at Spit Fyre, who was licking sand off the baby Orm. "But one of the reasons I wanted you to be my Apprentice was that I knew you would think for yourself. You would work out what you thought was best, and then you would be brave enough to do it."

Tod felt as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She realized how worried she had been about doing the wrong thing and disappointing Septimus, but now she understood. She could be an Apprentice and be herself too—and *he thought she was brave.*

“So, it’s all worked out pretty well, don’t you think?” Septimus was saying.

Tod smiled. She thought it had worked out very well indeed.

Karamander plied her guests with a feast. As they sat inside the dim coolness of the tent escaping the fierce heat of the midday sun, Septimus, Beetle, Marwick and Dandra discussed the journey home. Dandra did not think it wise to wait until nightfall. “The Red Queen has spies at the Port of the Singing Sands,” she said. “We must get there before they are alerted.”

“Rest and eat first,” Karamander told them. “There is time to do both.”

Outside the tent, Spit Fyre and his new baby kept watch. The Orm—or the Ormlet, as people were now calling it after Tod made a lame joke about breaking eggs—kept glancing up at Mother Orm. Every now and then Spit Fyre gave the tail stub of the Orm a rasping lick. Already a new barb was forming and it would not be long until a fresh tail would begin to grow.

Leaving the older ones to talk, the younger ones drifted outside and went to dabble their toes in the cool spring that bubbled up beside the flat rock. With them was Darius Wrenn, pink from the sun, his eyes shining with excitement. “You look a bit different from the last time I saw you,” Tod said, remembering the worried, pale boy who blinked a lot.

“Marwick made them let me come too,” Darius said shyly. “He said I could carry the water bottles and help him read the map and make myself useful. And I *did*.” He watched his feet in the green of the water and then said very quietly, “I *love* it here.”

“So do I,” Kaznim said. She smiled at Darius. “Do you want to play Village Chief?”

Darius blinked in surprise. “Play what?”

“It’s fun. I’ll show you.” As Kaznim began to scoop out hollows in the sand, Tod got up and left them to it. She walked back to the star-strewn tent, feeling a little nervous. There was something important that she wanted to ask Beetle and Karamander Draa.

It was hard to leave when the time came. In the midst of the partings and the promises to meet again, the small figure of Darius Wrenn stood wide-eyed as ever, too excited to speak. One of the people in the amazing ExtraOrdinary Apprentice Spell—he thought it was probably the one named

Tod—had done something wonderful. She had gone into the tent in that confident way that he wanted to have one day, and then, she had emerged with Beetle and the Apothecary. Darius had watched them walk around the outside of the tent and had heard the murmur of them talking. And then the Apothecary had come over and she had asked him *to be her Apprentice*. And to live in the tent with her and her daughters, just like *a real family*. Darius still could not believe it. And what had surprised him almost as much was that Beetle had said that he would really miss Darius and that he would be very welcome if he ever wanted to return to the Manuscriptorium.

But Darius didn't think he ever would.

That afternoon, Tod and Oskar became SandRiders once again. They took the *Wiz* and *Beetle* back to the Port of the Singing Sands. With no fear of sand lions or a missed Egg-hatching, it was a thrilling ride. Above them flew Spit Fyre, ferrying Beetle and Marwick to the Port of the Singing Sands.

As the sun began to sink over the sea, Marwick, Tod, Beetle, Ferdie and Oskar met up outside the **Hidden** arch. Led by Tod and Marwick, they entered the Ancient Ways. They walked through nine Hubs until at last they found themselves behind the Manuscriptorium door, which was quickly opened by the faithful Ephaniah Grebe. He had not left his post for a second.

Back at the star-strewn tent, Septimus was saying his farewells. His hand held tightly by Karamander Draa, Darius Wrenn watched the ExtraOrdinary Wizard climb onto his dragon, shift the baby Orm out of the way, get nipped on the arm for his trouble and then lift off into the starlit sky. Surrounded by his new family, the small boy watched the beautiful green dragon wheel around and set off into the night. Darius looked up at Karamander and smiled. His new life was about to begin.

It would be a long flight home, but Septimus did not mind at all. His Apprentice had done well, the Castle was safe and, best of all, he had his dragon back. Septimus didn't even mind that he was going to have to share Spit Fyre with a jealous little Ormlet, who possessed very sharp teeth—*ouch*—and was not afraid to use them.

The next morning at the Castle, Tod, Oskar and Ferdie were waiting in the courtyard of the Wizard Tower, at the front of the huge welcoming party for Septimus, Spit Fyre and his baby Orm. As they saw a distant sparkle of green appear over the snowy treetops of the Forest, a hush fell over the whole Castle. Word had spread that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard was bringing his dragon home at last and people had gathered on the rooftops, watching for the return of what they thought of as their dragon too. As the impressive sight of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard flying his dragon drew close, a ripple of applause began to spread, until a tumult of clapping filled the air.

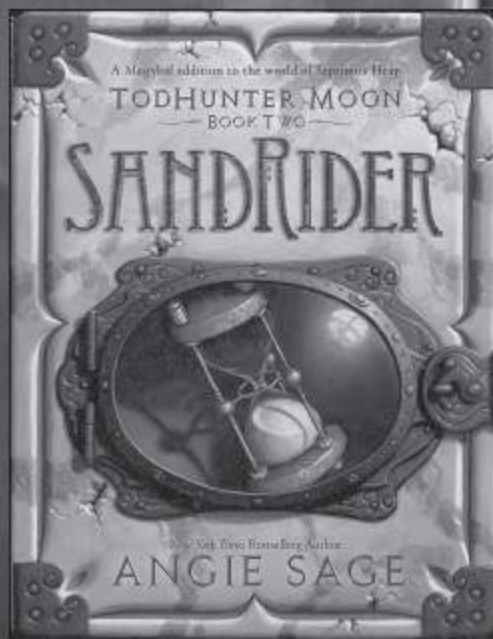
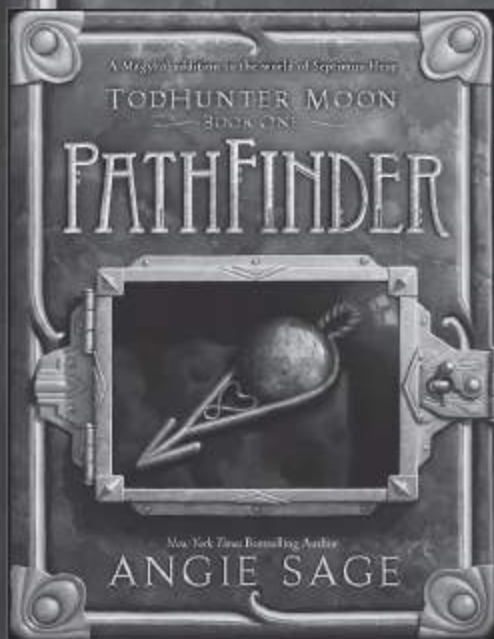
Spit Fyre landed expertly in the courtyard to the background of cheers and whistles of encouragement. Septimus leaped down from the pilot seat and, curled around the dragon spine behind him, Tod saw a twist of blue—the sleeping baby Orm.

Septimus gave Jenna a quick hug and hurried straight over to Tod, Oskar and Ferdie. “We did it!” he said. “Thanks to you three, we have the Orm. Our Castle is safe.”

Tod exchanged smiles with Ferdie and Oskar. They knew that from now on it would always be “*our* Castle.”

BACK AD

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DEDICATION

For Milo Wishart

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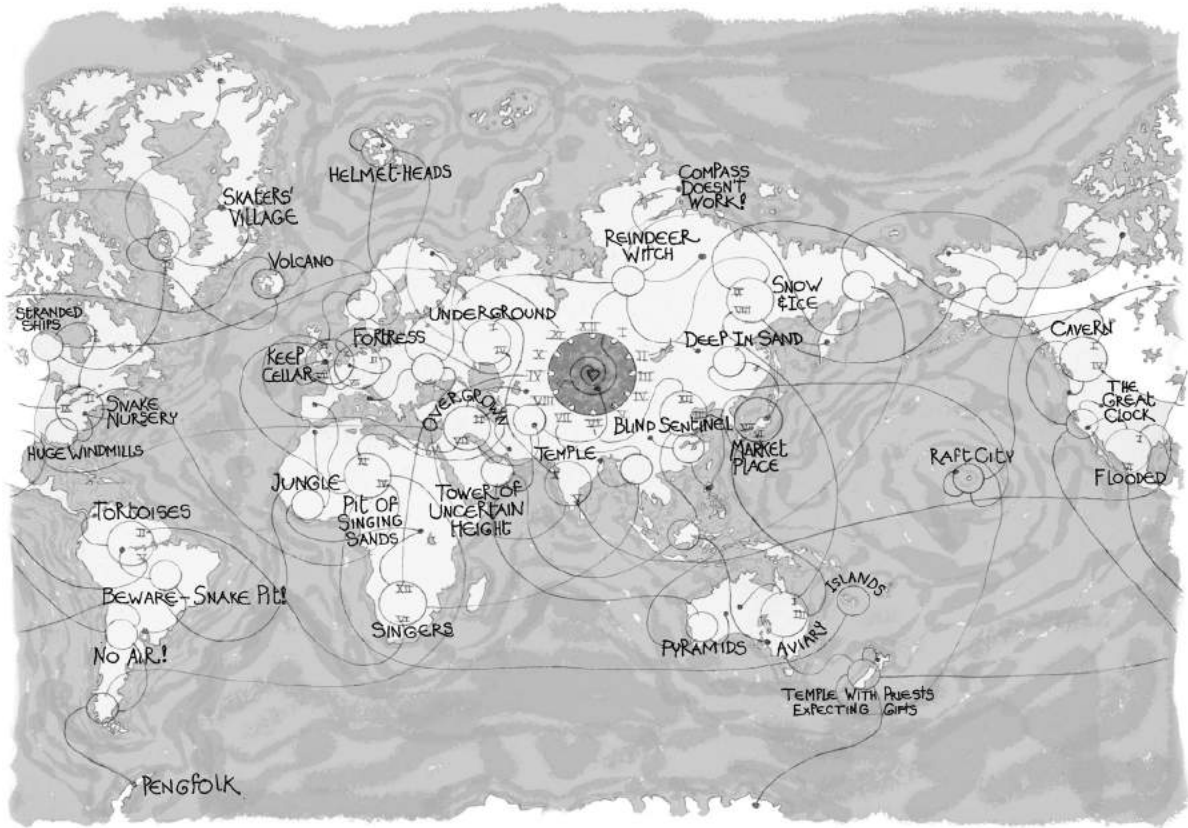
Two Worlds Become One

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PART I

THE QUEEN'S CHAMBER

T*he last echoes of the* midday bells faded away. In a secret chamber deep in the heart of the Red Palace, three dusty women stood trembling before the Red Queen. The room, at the very heart of the palace, was hexagonal and dimly lit by one slit window high in the only wall that faced the central gardens. Despite its opulence, it felt like a prison.

From her golden throne on a dais, the Queen glared at the women. “And where,” she demanded, “*where* is the sorcerer I sent for?”

The women did not respond. This was not because they had no answer, but because the guard at the door had told them that if they valued their lives they must wait five seconds before replying. The Red Queen was offended by those who did not appear to think carefully about their answers.

Conscious of the Queen's pale blue eyes upon them, two of the women were pretending an interest in the red and gold tiles of the floor. The third, the youngest, stared ahead beneath lowered eyelashes.

The Red Queen sized up the women. There was a large blowsy one wrapped like an untidy parcel in blue silks, who was known as the Lady and was the sister of the sorcerer the Queen required. To the left of the Lady stood her sidekick, Mitza Draddenmora Draa: a square, hatchet-faced woman with hair scraped back and a mouth like the edge of a knife. In Mitza the Red Queen recognized a kindred spirit.

The third woman was little more than a girl. The Queen regarded her with narrowed eyes. This one she knew only by the name Marissa. She had an insolent stare and was dressed in what the Queen considered to be a most peculiar style: she wore beads woven through her hair, a leather headband, a dusty green cloak and heavy boots. She was scruffy and pretty and the Queen did not take to her at all. The Marissa girl had, she thought, the look of a witch about her.

Marissa felt the gaze of the Red Queen upon her and risked an upward glance. Their eyes met. The Queen saw something dark and shifting beneath a layer of carefully constructed innocence. Just as the Queen was

wondering whether it might be wise to chop this witch's head off before she caused any trouble, the five-second pause was over and the Lady stammered out her answer.

"Y-your Majesty. My brother is ill . . ." Her voice faded away under the steel-blue stare of the Red Queen.

The Queen said nothing. She moved her gaze to a point just above the women's heads, and once again an uncomfortable silence fell. The Queen was thinking out her strategy. She knew that she appeared to have all the advantages and those before her thought they had none, but this was not so. The women held the key to something she had been promised. The Queen wanted it—and she wanted it *now*. With a great feeling of longing she thought about the distant Castle the sorcerer had promised her. His descriptions of its beautiful old buildings and its biddable inhabitants longing for a strong ruler replayed in her head. Not to mention its rich surroundings that would also be hers for the taking: the verdant farmlands, the nearby forest, a wide river running to the sea and a wealthy Port. The Red Queen wanted to have that Castle so much it hurt. She was sick of the dry red dust and the heat of her city, the press of the people, the beggars crowded outside the city walls. Her subjects were surly fools who did not obey her as they should—it would be wonderful to have a new start. The Queen glanced down at the sharp dagger of sunlight that stabbed through the window slit and cast a white strip upon the red floor. She longed for the gentle green of what she now thought of as *her* Castle.

However, the Red Queen was not going to admit to any longings. No one had ever given her anything just because she longed for it, and she did not expect that to begin now. She must play this game carefully to get what she wanted. Her low voice flowed menacingly around the chamber. "I did not ask about the state of the sorcerer's health," the Queen said. "I asked for his whereabouts. I repeat: *Where is the sorcerer?*"

The sorcerer's sister just about managed to speak. "Y-your Majesty. M-my brother is at Hospitable Gard, for which we thank you. It is only your immense kindness and hospitality that—"

The Queen cut her short. "That is not where he is meant to be," she snapped. "I summoned him to my presence for the midday bell. *Why* is he not here?"

The woman in blue hardly dared to repeat what she had already said, but she could think of no alternative. A small, frightened voice emerged from the bundle of blue silks. “Because, Your Majesty, he . . . he is ill.”

“No one is too ill to refuse my summons. *No one.*”

The Lady glanced helplessly at her companions but they would not meet her gaze. She became flustered. “Your Majesty. I *beg* you. My brother cannot move. He has the most terrible . . .” Her voice failed her.

“Terrible *what?*” demanded the Queen.

“Headache.” As soon as she said the word the Lady knew she had made a mistake. It sounded like such a pathetic excuse. There was a silence that seemed to go on forever. The Lady heard the trickle of water from the fountains in the gardens beyond and she felt as though her life were dripping away with it.

“Headache,” the Red Queen finally repeated, as if the word was a piece of dog dirt she had found upon her shoe. “The powerful sorcerer Oraton-Marr has a . . . *headache.*”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said his miserable sister. And then added, “It’s really bad. Really, *really* bad. It’s—”

“Silence!” the Queen barked. She continued in a low, menacing voice. “I have a way of curing headaches.” The Queen’s hand went across to her sword, which hung down from a scabbard attached to the left side of her throne. “If your brother does not respond to my next summons I will assist him with his little problem. I will make sure that he has no *head to ache.* Understand?”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty,” the Lady stuttered.

“Now—*go!*”

Behind them the doors swung open and the women backed out, amazed at their reprieve. But they knew it would not last.

THE SUMMONS

Oraton-Marr lay prone on his bed as he had done for many weeks. Beside him sat his sister, still trembling from her audience with the Queen. “Orrie,” she whispered anxiously. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Gerrrr . . .” was the only reply.

His sister persisted. “Orrie, the thing is, the Queen is getting impatient. She wants her Castle. You know, the one those kids and that dragon came from. The one you promised her.” She refrained from saying *the one you so stupidly promised her, which was not yours to promise anyway*. The Lady had learned not to upset her brother in his present state.

His reply was another groan.

“She’s going to summon you again, Orrie. And if you don’t go to her I think something very bad will happen. I think . . .” The Lady paused. She hardly dared put into words what she thought would happen, but she was desperate. She had to somehow get her brother up from his sickbed. “I think she might cut off your head.”

Oraton-Marr thought the Queen would be doing him a favor if she cut off his head. It was no use to him in its present state. It felt as though someone were driving a red-hot spike through it and nailing it to the bed. He could no more go to see the Queen than he could fly to the moon. “Good,” he said.

It was four in the morning, in the deep, dark hours before dawn when a fearsome knocking on the door of Hospitable Gard woke the entire household. The Lady sat up in bed, her eyes wide with fear as she listened to the pounding echoing up the stairs. She got out of bed, wrapped her silk coat around her and crept down to the ground-floor atrium. There she found a wild-eyed Mitza clutching a hammer and Marissa looking artfully disheveled in a long nightdress, beneath which the Lady spotted a pair of sturdy boots, ready to flee. The three women stared at the heavy front door, which shivered under the onslaught of the pounding.

“What shall we do?” the Lady whispered.

Mitza tightened her grip upon her hammer. “We must answer it, my Lady,” she said. “And see what they want.”

“But we *know* what they want,” said the Lady. “They want Orrie.”

“Then they will have to have him,” Mitza said coldly.

Suddenly the pounding ceased and a shout of “Open up in the name of the Red Queen!” came from the other side of the door.

“We should open the door,” Marissa said. “They’ll break it down otherwise. It’s best to look helpful.”

The Lady knew Marissa was right, but even so she had hoped for a little more resistance. “You open it, then,” she said sulkily.

Trilling out in her most girly voice, “Hang on a mo’! It’s a bit heavy for us girls!” Marissa made a lot of noise pulling back the long bolt, then she heaved the door open, flicked back her hair and leaned languorously against the door breathing heavily, as though exhausted by her efforts.

The three guards outside were speechless for some moments until one of them managed to mumble, “Sorry, miss.”

The Captain of the Guard recovered his senses. Steadfastly avoiding looking at Marissa, he stepped forward brandishing a scroll with a large red seal. “I have a Royal Summons for the sorcerer Oraton-Marr,” he said.

The Lady held out a chubby, shaking hand. “I’m his sister. I’ll give it to him,” she said.

The Captain kept hold of the scroll. “Madam, I am ordered to deliver it to the sorcerer personally. Take me to him. At once!”

The Lady knew there was no point in arguing. The two remaining guards watched the Lady lead the Captain up the stairs, then they turned their attention to Marissa.

“What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” the youngest one asked.

Marissa giggled. “Same as you. Doing what I’m told.”

“Are you some kind of maid or something?”

“Something,” Marissa said, casually letting the top few buttons of her nightdress fall open. “What are you looking at?” she suddenly demanded.

“Um . . . your, um . . . key,” the young guard stammered. “It looks . . . um . . . very nice,” he finished lamely.

“Oh, *this* key,” Marissa said, sounding bored. She lifted up the plain iron key that she wore around her neck on a piece of green ribbon. “This is the key to the Castle. Now that is something the Queen would *love* to get her hands on.”

It was all too much for the young guard, who turned bright red. “Ha! I’m sure I would too,” he said with a nervous snort.

“Quiet!” the older guard said, cross at being left out of Marissa’s game.

“So,” Marissa asked, “are you taking the sorcerer away?”

“It’s not for us to say, miss,” the other guard said grumpily.

“If he doesn’t come now, we’ll be back later,” the young guard said. “To surprise him.”

“What a good idea.” Marissa giggled. “You are so clever. So . . . what time is best for surprising sorcerers, then?”

The older guard stepped between them and roughly pushed the younger to one side. “Cut it out, Number Three—or there’ll be trouble.”

The young guard cut it out. Silence fell in the atrium and they listened to the footfalls above. Soon footsteps were heard on the stairs and the Captain appeared without the summons, closely followed by the distressed Lady. “Please,” she begged, “please, surely you can see how impossible it is for him to even move from his pillow, let alone come to the Palace.”

“I merely deliver the summons,” the Captain said gruffly. “It is not my job to comment upon the capabilities of those receiving it.” With that he strode over to the door and the two guards fell in behind him. Marissa arranged herself so that she was leaning dreamily against a pillar, and as the young one went by he whispered, “See you again at three bells tomorrow morning.” He winked. “The best time for collecting sorcerers.”

Marissa smiled. “Can’t wait,” she said.

And then the Queen’s Guards were gone, leaving behind a wide-open door, the rush of cold night and a long wail of despair from the Lady as she fell to the floor.

While the Lady was being inexpertly comforted by a kneeling Mitza (gripping a hammer in one hand while with the other at arm’s length she warily patted the Lady like one would a small, snappy dog), Marissa shut the door and bolted it. Then she turned to the huddle on the floor and said, “I have a plan.”

The Lady looked up with an expression of despair. How could Marissa possibly have a plan? She was just a silly, empty-headed girl.

Marissa knew exactly what the Lady was thinking. That was fine by her. Let her think it. She would find out soon enough that she was wrong.

TEA AND PLOTS

Marissa shepherded the Lady and Mitza to the divans arranged around the edge of the atrium. She sat them down, found soft blankets to wrap around them—the Lady was shivering from shock—and told them to wait while she fetched some mint tea. Then she tiptoed away to the servants' kitchen, hoping they did not notice her boots.

Marissa lit the small spirit burner to heat the water, and as she snipped off the tender top leaves from the peppermint plant, she considered her course of action. Marissa had far more to gain from the sorcerer's recovery than she would ever admit to her two companions. Before Oraton-Marr had been poisoned with a **HeadBanger** potion, when he was convinced he was about to become the world's most powerful sorcerer and take over the fabled Wizard Tower, he had been rather free with his promises. Not only had he promised the Red Queen the Queenship of the Castle, he had also promised Marissa that he would help her become Witch Mother of the Wendron Witches, the coven that inhabited the Forest just outside the Castle. Marissa had also extracted a promise that the coven would, for the very first time, be given a base inside the Castle. She had her eye on a nice row of houses near the Moat.

Like the Red Queen, Marissa was reluctant to let go of the dream that Oraton-Marr had dangled before her. There was, she thought, still much to play for. Marissa enjoyed a game, and this was an exciting one with a good prize at the end of it. But she must play it carefully.

Marissa walked softly into the atrium carrying a tray of sweet peppermint tea and saffron wafers. Trying to look humble—but not entirely succeeding—she placed the tray upon the low table in front of the divan, dropped to her knees and poured the tea. Marissa waited until both the Lady and Mitza had settled comfortably back against the cushions and then, still kneeling, she began to speak. Careful to refer to Oraton-Marr in the way he had insisted upon before the **HeadBanger** potion, she said, “We must do our very best to save His Highness.”

“But what can we possibly do?” said the Lady. “There are guards on the gate.”

“We could smuggle him out,” Mitza suggested. “Put him in a sack. They might think he was turnips.”

The Lady looked horrified. “Orrie? *Turnips?* In a *sack?*”

Marissa suppressed a smile. She would love to put the sorcerer in a sack—and hurl him off the top of Hospitable Gard while he was in it—but she had her career to consider. “It’s simple,” Marissa said. “We must get His Highness well enough to answer the Queen’s summons—and, more important, well enough to take over the Wizard Tower.”

“But *how?*” the Lady wailed.

“I will go and get the antidote from the Apothecary—”

But the Lady was not listening. All her pent-up grievances and petty annoyances with her brother were tumbling out. “He’s hopeless! I told him he shouldn’t count his Orms before they were hatched, but he wouldn’t listen. And then he promised that awful Queen something that there was no way he could give her. And even if he gets better now, what use is the Wizard Tower to him without the Orm? He’s never going to be powerful enough to run a place like that. *Never.*”

Marissa saw Mitza looking at the Lady, shocked.

“Well, he’s *not*,” the Lady said defiantly. “I know my brother. He needs all the lapis lazuli he can get to be even a half-decent Wizard. He knows a few **Darke** tricks and he can **Conjure** up some nasty creatures, but he’s not properly trained.”

Marissa busied herself pouring out more peppermint tea, listening with great interest as the Lady continued to pour out her frustrations about her brother. At last the Lady subsided, exhausted by her rant.

“Actually,” Marissa said, “the Orm is already where His Highness wants it: in the Castle. I hear they are going to set it burrowing under the Wizard Tower so there’ll be plenty of lapis lazuli for him. It already sits on a load of the stuff anyway. In fact there will soon be so much lapis underneath it that anyone could run it.” Marissa affected a giggle. “Even little old me.”

“Huh!” Mitza burst out. “A silly, empty-headed little thing like you? That, girl, is taking things too far.”

Marissa felt like kicking Mitza, but she merely said, “Miss Mitza, do have a drop more tea.” Marissa poured the tea and then hurried upstairs to get her witch cloak. She took a wad of money and a few trinkets from the Lady’s bedroom in case a bribe was needed, then ran back down and headed for the door.

“Marissa,” the Lady called querulously. “Where are you going?”

Marissa stopped halfway out the door. “To the Apothecary. To get the **HeadBanger** antidote. Must go. Got a camel train to catch.”

“But *Marissa . . .*” the Lady called as the door was closing.

“What now?” Marissa demanded.

“You won’t be back until nearly midnight. What shall I do if they come for Orrie before then?” The Lady’s voice rose into a wail.

What Marissa wanted to say was, *Who cares what you do, you stupid old bat?* But she restrained herself. “They won’t,” she said, and slammed the door.

Mitza waddled over to the door and pushed the bolt across. “She’ll never get it. There is no way that nasty Apothecary woman is going to give that silly witch the antidote to the **HeadBanger**. No way *at all*.” Mitza shook her head with a grim enjoyment.

The Lady sighed. “Well, if anyone can persuade that ghastly Karamander Draa woman to hand it over, Marissa can. She seems very determined, don’t you think? I find her rather scary, to tell you the truth.”

Mitza tried not to look surprised at the Lady’s confidential way of speaking to her. She had noticed that since Oraton-Marr had been rendered incapable, the Lady had relaxed and begun to take her into her confidence. Mitza realized that she was metamorphosing from a servant to a companion—maybe even, she thought, a friend. Although Mitza was not entirely sure what a friend actually was, she liked the idea. It would give her much greater influence over events. And probably better food, too.

Mitza considered her answer carefully. “There is indeed something about that witch, my Lady,” she said. “But even so, I do not think the Apothecary will give her the potion. She will not forget that His Highness stole her children from her.”

“But it’s not as though he kept them,” the Lady protested a little petulantly. “She got them back in the end, didn’t she?”

Mitza nodded. “She did indeed. And why she wanted them back I cannot imagine. That small one was a noisy little brat. And the big one was plain rude.” Mitza sighed. “But children are precious to their parents, so they say. And that can come in useful at times.” She smiled, showing her sharp little white teeth, so closely packed together. “Very useful in all kinds of ways. Ha-ha.”

The Lady flashed Mitza a puzzled glance. Sometimes the woman worried her.

Mitza warmed to her theme. “Perhaps Marissa is planning to do something unpleasant to one of them and use it as a bargaining tool. I imagine that would work.”

“I imagine it would,” the Lady replied, a little uncomfortably. Then she brightened up. “Well, as long as she comes back with the antidote I won’t be asking how she got it.”

Mitza was silent. The talk of children and their parents had turned Mitza’s thoughts to Alice TodHunter Moon and the Castle, where the girl now lived. If there was any chance of going there soon, then Mitza must make her own visit to an Apothecary. She would hate to be unprepared for a meeting with young Alice. It would be a wasted opportunity, and Mitza hated waste.

FISHFACE

Dawn was breaking as Marissa hurried out through Beggars’ Gate, the only unguarded entrance to the Red City, and joined the queue for the camel train. As Marissa waited, she took in the scene. Spread before her was a sprawling encampment of tents of all shapes and sizes and conditions, ranging from a ragged blanket thrown over a few sticks to some large circular structures of richly embroidered cloth, which were quite beautiful. Their inhabitants were a mixture of beggars, free spirits, criminals, conjurers, mavericks and misfits—anyone who preferred to live outside the harsh regime of the Red Queen. Many there felt that the sacrifice of a house with stone walls was worth the peace of mind it brought. It was, with some justification, known as the City of the Free.

As Marissa shuffled forward, getting ever closer to the steaming, harrumphing camels, she gazed down at the sea of tents, many of which glimmered from within with candlelight, and in the dull light of the dawn they looked far more enticing than the camel train ahead. Marissa watched the early-morning activity; she saw fires being coaxed into life, listened to the gentle murmur of conversation and smelled the coffee being brewed.

Then she looked out to the empty desert beyond and up to the lightening sky, where a few stars were still visible. Marissa was used to the confines of the Forest and the city, and the great emptiness of the desert sent a feeling of panic rushing through her.

To overcome the panic, Marissa concentrated on the camels ahead. She saw hot camel breath steaming in the air, heard the phlegmy snorts, felt the ground shake with the thud of their stamping feet and watched their ungainly lurching lope as they set off with their passengers. Which made her feel even worse.

So Marissa turned her thoughts to the earlier hours of the morning. What stuck in her mind was her comment to Mitza about the Wizard Tower: *Anyone could run it. Even little old me.* Mitza's scathing response rang in her ears, and Marissa thought how fed-up she was with people treating her with no respect. If she ran the Wizard Tower, that would show them. No one would dare belittle her then. Marissa allowed herself to savor the idea: Witch Mother in charge of the Wizard Tower. Why shouldn't a witch run the Wizard Tower? With all that new lapis soon to be made by the Orm, it was true that pretty much anyone with a little bit of **Magyk** could run it. All they needed was the nerve to walk in and do it. And *she*, Marissa thought with a smile, had more nerve than anyone else she knew.

The queue shuffled forward one place and the person behind stepped on Marissa's cloak. Fired up with her newly imagined status, Marissa turned around and glared imperiously at the man, who, to her immense satisfaction, shrank back with a hasty apology. Marissa turned away nursing a smile. She could get used to this.

Suddenly, Marissa found herself at the head of the camel queue. Her smile changed to an expression of distaste as she eyed "her" camel. It was a large, ragged beast. Its hair was coming off in clumps, half its ear was missing, and its yellow eyes regarded Marissa with undisguised malevolence. It did not smell too good either.

"Where to, missy?" the camel driver asked.

A sudden realization came over Marissa: *she did not want Oraton-Marr to recover.* She didn't want him bossing her around again and making snide remarks—and more to the point, she did not want *him* in the Wizard Tower—she wanted it for herself.

Marissa looked at the camel driver: small, wrinkled and burnished like a nut from the desert sun. She saw his one-toothed smile and his calculating leer, and it was with great pleasure that she told him, “Nowhere, Fishface,” then turned on her heel and walked away.

A LOZENGE FOR A BAG OF KRAAN

Marissa took the path down into the encampment and wandered slowly through the tents. She stopped a few people to ask for what she sought, and after ten minutes she found herself outside a beautiful tent with faded red and blue stripes. A small handbell sat on a low stool; Marissa rang the bell and waited. Some minutes later—just as Marissa was thinking of giving up—a tiny woman with piercing blue eyes looked out suspiciously.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Are you an Apothecary?” Marissa asked.

“What if I am?” the woman demanded angrily.

Marissa took out the money that she had intended for Karamander Draa and held the notes out flat on her palm, as though she were offering sugar lumps to a horse.

The woman looked at the notes; it was more than she would earn in months. “Come in, my darling,” she told Marissa. “You are lucky. You have found the most skilled Apothecary in the City of the Free. I can supply anything you wish.” The woman cast her shrewd gaze over Marissa. “And no questions asked, my lovely, no questions at all.”

Marissa handed over the notes and stepped into the dimness of the tent, redolent with the tang of bitter powders, fragrant with the oily musk of suspensions.

An hour later, Marissa slipped unnoticed into Hospitable Gard. To the sound of snores drifting down the stairs, she quietly made Oraton-Marr’s favorite sherbet drink and laid it on a tray with a small bowl of sugared almonds—the only food he could bear to eat. Beside the bowl she placed the green lozenge for which she had exchanged her handful of notes. Treading softly on the stone stairs in her bare feet, Marissa took the tray up to Oraton-Marr’s room on the upper floor. As she pushed open the door the

long white muslin drapes in front of the window moved gently in the cool morning breeze.

The sorcerer lay prone on a simple, low bed covered with a linen sheet. His green eyes, dark with pain, watched Marissa as she walked lightly across the room. As Marissa knelt down beside him with the tray, Oraton-Marr attempted a smile. It was, Marissa noted, very weak. She did not give him much longer in this world. “Good morning, Your Highness,” she whispered. “I have brought you something to ease the headache.”

Oraton-Marr groaned. “Nothing . . . will ease it,” he whispered. “Only . . . only the Apothecary . . .”

“I have been to the Apothecary,” Marissa said, well aware that there was only one Apothecary who Oraton-Marr would think she meant.

His eyes lit up with hope. “She gave you something?” he whispered.

“She gave me this.” Marissa showed him the green lozenge.

“For *me*?” he asked.

Oraton-Marr’s expression reminded Marisa of a dog begging. It revolted her, but she hid her revulsion well. “It is indeed for you, Your Highness,” Marissa replied. “And here is a sherbet to help you swallow it.”

With a wheeze of pain, the sorcerer struggled to raise his head.

Marissa closed her fingers over the lozenge, trapping it inside her fist. “But first,” she said softly, “first, there is something I want.”

Oraton-Marr let his head fall and gave a cry of pain. “A price . . .” he murmured as his head hit the pillow. “But of course . . .” He looked Marissa in the eye. “Name it. I will pay.”

“I need a bodyguard,” Marissa said. “Something really scary.”

“How scary?” asked Oraton-Marr.

Marissa leaned forward. Oraton-Marr smelled her breath, sweet with one of his sugared almonds. “*Extremely* scary,” she whispered. Marissa had given some thought to how she was going to clear the Wizard Tower of its current occupants. “And it must particularly prey on Wizards. Oh, and Apprentices too, of course.”

Oraton-Marr opened his eyes wide in amazement. But he felt too ill to question Marissa. All he wanted was the lozenge. “I have . . . something,” he croaked.

“I knew you would,” Marissa said.

Oraton-Marr said nothing. Marissa was extremely lucky that he had what she wanted. He was an itinerant sorcerer and traveled light, with little **Magykal** hardware—as it was known in the Wizarding trade. He kept what he had in a wooden trunk recently painted purple in honor of the position he had hoped to occupy in the Wizard Tower. The contents of the trunk were a mixture of stolen **Charms**, **Engenders** and **Talismans**—none of which were of any use to him in his present state. “Kraan,” he whispered. “In the trunk. They kill . . . anyone with . . . green eyes.”

Marissa rifled through the contents of the trunk, gritty with sand. She had no idea what she was looking for. She held up each object in turn until she showed him a soft black leather drawstring bag. “Yes,” he grunted.

Marissa weighed the bag in her hand. It was very heavy for its size. She pulled open the cords and peered inside to see it was full of shining red beads. “So how do they work, then?” she asked.

“Instructions in . . . bag,” Oraton-Marr whispered. “Take six beads. Only six. Makes one Kraan.”

“I’ll take the whole bag,” Marissa said, jiggling it up and down, listening to the glassy clinking of the beads, as though it were a toy.

Oraton-Marr groaned. The noise felt like needles stabbing his eardrums. He looked regretfully at the soft black leather bag. He would miss those little red beads. He had been planning to use the Kraan to help him take over the Wizard Tower—once he had acquired a pair of dark glasses, of course. But Oraton-Marr would pay anything the witch asked if she would only give him the green lozenge to cure his headache.

It was only after he had swallowed the lozenge and was falling headlong into a deep pit of sleep that Oraton-Marr realized that Marissa had never actually said that it *would* cure his headache.

With the bag of Kraan weighing heavy in her pocket, Marissa let herself into a deserted courtyard, which contained nothing more than a channel of cool, clear water running around the edge of its high walls and a single palm tree in the middle. She walked into the small patch of shade beneath the tree and disappeared.





PART II

DUST IN HIS EYE

In the Castle, in the cool of the early morning, Septimus Heap and his young Apprentice, Alice TodHunter Moon—known to most people as Tod—were setting off to visit Septimus’s eldest brother, Simon Heap.

They hurried down Wizard Way, the broad avenue that led from the Wizard Tower to the Palace, keeping to the middle to avoid the early-morning bustle that accompanied the opening of the various shops and businesses that lined the Way. The rays of the sun, still low in the sky, skimmed across the low roofs and sent shafts of light glinting off tall silver torch posts, eclipsing the light of their still-burning flames. At the far end of Wizard Way, Septimus and his Apprentice took a sharp right turn into Snake Slipway. This was a much narrower, winding street that led down to the Moat. On either side were houses, the more impressively tall ones on the right-hand side, but it was to the smaller houses on the left that Septimus and Tod were heading. The waters of the Moat were in sight, flowing sluggishly by the end of the slipway, when Septimus took a turn into a pretty front garden, walked up a short path and knocked on a bright red front door.

A young woman opened the door. Lines of worry etched her face, and her brown hair was hastily braided and tied in a knot, lacking her usual ribbons. She wore a long white tunic covered with intricate colorful embroidery, and some serious brown boots. “Hello, Lucy,” Septimus said. “I just got your message.”

“Oh, Septimus. Thank you for coming,” Lucy Heap said with a strained smile.

“Tod’s with me; hope that’s okay?”

“Tod is welcome here anytime,” Lucy said. She looked at Tod, who was hanging back behind Septimus. “You know that, Tod, don’t you? Anytime, night or day. After what you did for our William, this is your home too. Anyway, come in, both of you. Simon’s upstairs.”

Septimus and Tod followed Lucy along the narrow corridor to the stairs. “Your message said that Simon has dust in his eye?” Septimus asked.

“Yes. *Dust*,” Lucy said.

Septimus thought she sounded somewhat overwrought about such a little thing. “I was wondering,” he said carefully, for Lucy was clearly on a short fuse, “whether Simon should see a physician. Have you asked Marcellus to look at it?”

Lucy wheeled around to face her visitors. “It’s not that kind of dust,” she said desperately, and she turned and ran up the stairs. Septimus and Tod hurried after her.

Lucy led Septimus and Tod into the large room at the front of the house. Simon was lying on the bed, which was made up for the day and covered with a patchwork quilt. He was half propped up on a nest of pillows with his head tilted back and his eyes closed. “Si,” Lucy said quietly, “there’s someone to see you.”

Simon covered his right eye with his hand and pushed against it hard as if to keep it in place. Warily, he opened his left eye. “Oh,” he said. “Sep. Tod. Sorry, can’t sit up. Afraid of it all . . . falling out.”

“Falling out?” asked Septimus. “What . . . you mean your *eye*?”

“Yeah. What’s left of it,” Simon answered quietly.

Lucy slipped her arm around Tod’s shoulders and they drew back while Septimus went over to his brother. “It’s your lapis eye?” Septimus asked, knowing full well it was, but needing time to think. The iris in Simon’s right eye, already injured, had turned to lapis lazuli after he had used **Darke Magyk** to travel through solid lapis in order to rescue his son, William. This had, of course, blinded him in that eye, but apart from that had given Simon no trouble—until now.

“When did it happen?” asked Septimus.

“Been coming on for some time, I think,” Simon said. “It’s been feeling very scratchy, like there was grit in it or something.”

“And the color changed too,” Lucy chimed in. “It used to be so bright, such a brilliant blue with a little streak of gold in it, but for a few weeks now I’ve thought it was getting duller, and then last night I thought it looked quite gray. But this morning it was . . .” Her voice trailed off and she put her hand over her mouth to stifle a sob.

“Could I take a look?” Septimus asked Simon. “Just so I know what we’re dealing with.”

“Yeah. I warn you, it’s not a pretty sight,” Simon said.

Gingerly Simon took his hand away from his eye and opened it. Septimus leaned over and was shocked to see a damp clump of gray dust filling the eye socket. He had never thought of Simon as blind in one eye before, for the lapis had had a sparkle to it and had suited him. But the grayish-white dust looked dead and blank.

Septimus straightened up and tried to think of something positive to say. “It looks like it’s still in one piece. I don’t think it’s going to fall out.”

“Doesn’t feel that way,” Simon said.

Suddenly Lucy burst out with, “But *why*? Why has it done that? Don’t you have any idea, Septimus?”

Septimus shook his head. “I suppose the **Magyk** that transformed the living eye to lapis has faded.” He shook his head. “But it is very odd. The lapis seemed so stable.”

“Can’t you put the **Magyk** back somehow?” Lucy asked. “Make it turn to lapis again?”

Septimus was not at all sure that he could, but he didn’t want to upset Lucy any more than she was already. “I’ll do my best to try, Lucy,” he said. “I’ll go straight to the library and look it up. I’ll ask Marcia, too. I’ll do everything I can. I promise.”

“Thanks, little bro,” Simon said. He put his hand firmly over his eye once again and leaned back on the pillows.

Lucy showed them out. “Promise you won’t tell anyone?” she said. “You know how gossip gets around, and I don’t want William to hear it. I don’t want him scared.” She lowered her voice. “Simon thinks that it’s going to spread. Because it was only the iris that was lapis, but now his whole eye is dust. He’s afraid his brain will be next.”

“No!” Septimus was shocked. “That won’t happen. Surely. It’s just the eye, that’s all.”

Lucy shook her head. “I don’t know, Septimus,” she said. “I think Simon might be right, and I can’t bear—”

A sudden thud from the attic made Lucy stop midsentence. “That’s William,” she said. “I must stop him running in to bounce on our bed. And . . . oh gosh, he’ll be late for school if I don’t hurry.”

Tod and Septimus walked back to the Wizard Tower. “Did Simon’s eye look bad?” Tod asked.

“It did,” Septimus admitted. “It looked horrible.”

“Do you think you can you find some **Magyk** to turn it back to lapis?” Tod asked.

Septimus shook his head. “I shall turn the library upside down to look,” he said. “But what happened to Simon’s eye is some kind of ancient Earth **Magyk**, and very little is written about such things.”

Tod was silent for a while. As they walked beneath the Great Arch into the Wizard Tower courtyard, she said, “So . . . could it spread into Simon’s head?”

Septimus sighed. “Maybe if I understood what has caused this, I would know the answer. But right now, I don’t.”

“So we have to find out,” Tod said.

“Yes, we do,” Septimus agreed. But he did not sound very hopeful.

GROUNDWORK

Some miles away in the depths of the Forest, Marissa was stepping out of what looked like a small ramshackle hut built of logs and festooned with twigs. No stranger to the Forest, Marissa then made her way confidently through an avenue of immensely tall trees and set off along the dark and narrow Forest paths. She walked alone, but her plans for the future kept her company, whirling around her head, growing ever wilder and more exciting. Marissa longed to take the first step with her plans and **Engender** a bodyguard Kraan, but before she did that, there was something she had to fix.

Before Marissa had left the Forest for the Red City, she had asked a select band of the younger witches loyal to her—known to the other witches as the Toadies—to kidnap the baby Orm from the Castle. This had been part of Marissa’s old deal with Oraton-Marr. Her new plans called for something quite different. She now needed the Ormlet to take up residence in the Wizard Tower and start producing precious lapis lazuli beneath it as soon as possible. There must be no stealing of the Ormlet—or Ormnaping, as the

witches called it. Marissa hoped they had not already done it; the last thing she wanted was to turn up at the Summer Circle to find that vicious little creature waiting inside her tent.

Marissa hurried along the path that led up to the coven's Summer Circle, and as she rounded a bend she was pleased to see two young witches, Ariel and Star. They were wandering along deep in conversation, but at the sight of Marissa they became silent and looked, Marissa thought, a little guilty. Anxious to get on with her plans, Marissa ignored her niggles of doubt. "Hey, guys!" she said brightly.

"Hi there," Ariel said.

"How's it going?" asked Star.

"Oh, really well. Fantastic, in fact," Marissa said. "How's Morwenna?" Morwenna Mould was the ailing Witch Mother of the coven.

"Not great," Star replied. "It's sad, really. She keeps falling over. And she's going a bit . . . you know . . . strange. Obsessed with searching for some kind of key."

"We've found all sorts of keys for her, but they're never the right ones," Ariel added.

Marissa knew perfectly well what kind of key the Witch Mother was searching for: the Universal Castle Key. Many hundreds of years in the past it had been lost by a careless ExtraOrdinary Wizard and picked up by a passing witch, who had soon become Witch Mother of the coven. Since then the key had been passed down as a secret symbol of office from one Witch Mother to the next. Marissa—and the young guard—knew exactly where the key was: hanging around her neck on a green ribbon. "Oh, that's so *sad*," she said, trying to sound sympathetic but failing utterly.

"Yes, it is," Star said crossly.

Ariel hurriedly changed the subject. It would not be good to alienate the person who was clearly going to be the next Witch Mother. "Marissa, it's good to see you," she said. "We've not seen so much of you recently."

"We're all up in the Summer Circle now," Star chipped in, understanding what Ariel was doing and trying to be friendly herself. "It's great after that gloomy quarry."

"Yeah," Marissa said. "I hate that place. So dark."

"Mind you, you look like you've been in the sun," Star said.

“Really?” Marissa laughed. “It must be all that fresh air down in the Port. I’ve had a bit of business. With You-Know-Who.”

Ariel and Star gasped. “Not the Port Witch Coven?”

Marissa put her finger to her lips. “*Shh*. I’m saying nothing. Hey, guys, listen. There’s something important I need you to do. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Star.

“You know the plan to get the Ormlet? Well, it’s canceled.”

“Oh! But why?” Ariel asked.

“I’ll explain later,” said Marissa. “No one’s got it yet, then?”

“Not after it bit Selina’s little finger off, no,” Star said a little sourly.

“Oh, did it?” Marissa thought how glad she was not to have to deal with the Ormlet anymore. “Well, pass the word, will you? Ormnapping is off. Okay?”

“Okay,” Ariel said.

“Quick as you can.” With that Marissa turned on her heel and hurried off with the air of important things to do.

Ariel and Star—personal spies of the Castle Queen, Jenna—watched Marissa stride away into the leafy shadows.

“I hate the way she calls us ‘guys,’” said Ariel.

“And then treats us like servants,” added Star.

“So do we report this?”

“Yeah, you know what Queen Jenna said: Report *everything*. And besides, I fancy lunch at Wizard Sandwiches, don’t you?”

“You bet I do,” said Ariel. “And supper.”

It was late afternoon when Marissa finally had her destination in sight: the old Castle Infirmary. A dilapidated wooden building set away from the Castle on the far side of the Moat, the Infirmary languished in the shade of the outlying trees of the Forest and had a dank, musty air to it. Recently it had been the subject of a little more attention than it had been used to, for it had become the venue for wild parties thrown by the older Castle Apprentices, scribes and the younger witches. This had done little to enhance its looks.

Marissa took the Universal Castle Key from around her neck and turned the lock of the battered Infirmary door. It swung creakily open and Marissa stepped into the musty gloom. She locked the door behind her and crept

stealthily through an eerie ward of empty beds with bare mattresses. Spooked by the dimness of the ward, the festoons of cobwebs and its gloomy shadows, Marissa stopped at the nurses' desk and found her supply of candles. With the help of a lighting flint she managed to get a candle lit, but a sudden gust of wind blew through a broken window and snuffed the flame out. With shaking hands, she grabbed all the candles and lit the lot.

Marissa sat for a few minutes watching the candle flames burn bright. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves and then opened the bag of Kraan and looked at the little red beads inside. They shone in the candlelight like hundreds of knowing little eyes staring at her. Fear stole over Marissa like a dark cloud. She felt as though the beads were ganging up on her, whispering to one another, laughing, plotting . . . She shoved the bag of Kraan into a drawer and slammed it shut.

A wave of exhaustion engulfed Marissa. She lay down on the nearest bed, pulled its blanket around her and fell asleep, leaving the forest of candles burning merrily.

CHARM SCHOOL

That afternoon, when Tod came into the **Charm** Library on the tenth floor of the Wizard Tower, she found Jo-Jo Heap leafing through the Global **Charm** Index. That was strange, she thought. Jo-Jo was not a frequent visitor to the Wizard Tower.

Jo-Jo looked up and saw a girl, tall for her age, with brilliant green eyes and her dark hair cut short except for a long, neatly plaited elflock. She wore leggings and a short jacket in regulation Apprentice green, and around her waist was a battered but impressive thick silver belt. "Oh, hi, Tod," Jo-Jo said.

"Hello, Jo-Jo," Tod replied coolly. She found Jo-Jo the least likable of the six brothers of her tutor, Septimus Heap. Although Jo-Jo was almost four years older than Septimus, he did not seem very grown-up. He hung out with the more unpleasant Apprentices in the Wizard Tower, and Tod knew he was friendly with Newt Makken and his brother, Drammer, another first year Apprentice. Drammer was no friend to Tod. He blamed

her for taking away his chance to be in the prestigious Apprentice Sled Race and never missed an opportunity to taunt her for not finishing the race.

But the Makken brothers were nothing compared to Jo-Jo's ex-girlfriend: a witch named Marissa. Marissa had recently put the lives of Tod and her two friends, Ferdie and Oskar Sarn, in great danger, and the Wizard Tower gossip was that Marissa and Jo-Jo were back together. Tod had no wish to be in the same space with someone who had anything to do with Marissa. If she had not had a tutorial with the **Charm** Wizard, Rose, she would have walked straight out and not come back until Jo-Jo had gone.

But Rose was already coming out of the inner **Charm** Chamber. A fairly new Ordinary Wizard, Rose still wore her blue robes with a sense of pride. As **Charm** Wizard she had her specialist's symbols embroidered on the sleeves, which were edged with a darker blue ribbon. Tall, with her long brown hair neatly plaited into a braid that hung down to her waist, Rose brought a sense of calm wherever she went. Her light green eyes lit up with pleasure at seeing Tod. "Hello, Tod. I've been looking forward to this all morning."

Rose held open the beautifully painted door to the **Charm** Chamber and a waft of chilly air came out. Tod stepped inside the icy chamber—but not before she had caught a sidelong scowl from Jo-Jo. Rose closed the door behind them and quietly slid the lock across. "Good, he's out of the way. Now, Tod, are you wearing your **Charm** bracelets?"

Tod held up both wrists to show Rose two broad pink bands. These helped counteract the low temperature needed to keep the older **Charms** stable.

"Well remembered," Rose replied. "Would you like a FizzFroot?"

"Oh, yes, please."

Tod loved the **Charm** Chamber. It made her feel as if she had been wrapped up in a huge, multicolored patchwork quilt; although in reality it was a highly organized twelve-sided room in which resided every known example of **Charms**. The quilt effect was the result of the hundreds of tiny lockers that lined the walls. They were stacked from floor to ceiling, each one painted with different patterns and colors. Tod had a breathless feeling of excitement when she thought about all the **Magykal** possibilities they contained.

Tod followed Rose past the **Charm** desk—twelve-sided, rich with complex wooden inlays in which all the keys to the **Charm** lockers were kept—and headed through a door set within the wall of cupboards. The door was painted to look as though it too were made of cupboards. The very first time that Tod had visited the **Charm** Chamber Rose had gone through the door without her noticing. Tod had looked up to find that Rose had apparently vanished.

The trompe l’oeil door led to Rose’s private office—a small room with a window looking out over the Forest. It contained a writing desk, two chairs, a tiny sink and a **Magykal FlickFyre** burner on which sat a neat little copper kettle.

“Sit yourself down, Tod,” Rose said. She clicked her fingers at the burner and told it: “**Light!**” and then perused the jars set above the sink, each containing small cubes of various colors. “I’ve got blue banana, pink grape, red pineapple and, er . . . something green with orange spots.”

“Green with orange spots, please,” said Tod. She watched Rose take the **FizzBom** cube from its jar, place it in a jug and pour hot water over it. The water fizzed up into a dark brown froth, and Rose carefully poured it into two glasses. They waited for the bubbles to settle and then drank the ice-cold fizz.

“That is weird,” Rose said. “It tastes of . . . um . . .”

“Chocolate orange,” said Tod. “With a tang of mint.”

“So it does,” Rose said. She put her glass down and leaned closer to Tod. “I’d like your opinion about Jo-Jo. He’s up to something, I know he is. Every time I try to see what he’s reading, he covers it with his arm. If I ask him if he needs help finding anything, he just grunts. He’s cross because I won’t let him in the **Charm** Cupboard without a permit.” Rose sighed. “He seems to think that because he’s Sep’s—I mean the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s—brother he can go anywhere he wants in the Wizard Tower. But he’s only got basic clearance, and he’s lucky to have that if you ask me, given the people he associates with.” Rose took a gulp of FizzFroot. “I’m sorry, Tod. This is *your* time, for you to learn about **Charms**, not for me to dump my work worries on you.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Tod said. And she didn’t. She liked Rose very much and was flattered to be taken into her confidence.

Rose stood up. “Enough of Jo-Jo Heap,” she said. “We’ve got far more important things to think about. Now, Tod, one of the most interesting—and tricky—things about **Charms** is the choosing of them. Of course if you only have one **Charm** available, then there is no choice, but if you find yourself in a **Charm** library—and there are many around the world—you will discover that there are hundreds of different **Charms** for the same thing. The skill is in choosing the right one. You have to learn to **Listen** to what they tell you. Let’s have a go, shall we?”

Intrigued, Tod followed Rose back into the **Charm** Chamber. Rose opened the central panel of the desktop to reveal a series of concentric circles of tiny keys lying on faded blue felt—one for each **Charm** Locker. Tod was amazed that Rose knew precisely which locker each key fit.

Despite there being so many keys, not one had a twin. Some were gold, some silver, some battered, some shiny and new. The bows were an array of all possible shapes and designs—bejeweled, incised, filigreed, enameled or just plain—and they all lay beneath Tod’s gaze as she wondered what possibilities they held.

After some minutes Rose said, “So, Tod, are you drawn to any particular key?”

There was indeed one key to which Tod’s gaze had repeatedly returned. She had tried to ignore it, for it was by no means the most interesting and certainly not the most beautiful. But the key seemed to be jumping out at her. Tod pointed to a simple blackened key made of pitted metal, its bow an uneven five-pointed star. It lay in the innermost circle. “That one.”

“Then you must take it,” Rose said.

Tod lifted the key from its bed and put it carefully in the flat of her palm just as Rose had shown her on her first visit.

“Very nicely handled,” Rose remarked. “It’s so sad to see some of the keys with the finer work snapped off. Now I shall leave it to you to figure out which locker this opens.” Rose saw Tod’s look of dismay. “But I’ll give you a clue first,” she said. “It is in the inner ring; therefore it is an ancient **Charm**. Do you remember where their section is?”

“Up there.” Tod pointed to the top circle of lockers that ran all the way around the chamber just below the ceiling.

“Well done. Use the ladder and make notes on each one. Then you can decide which cupboard the key fits. If you get it right, you can use the

Charm.”

“I can actually *use* it?” Tod asked.

“Why not?” Rose smiled. “I know you’re careful. But the deal is you’ll have to get the locker right the first time. Okay?”

“Wow. Yes, totally okay!”

Rose took the key and placed it on a red velvet pad in the center of the table. Then she sat quietly updating the **Charm** index while Tod methodically trundled the ladder around the circle of lockers, running up and down, making notes and drawing sketches of all the lockers. At last she was finished. She had a shortlist of three, which she showed to Rose.

“They’ve all got stars on them,” Tod explained.

“They do,” Rose agreed.

“So . . . I think I need to know a bit about what the **Charm** does before I can choose the right locker,” Tod said.

“You do indeed,” Rose said, sounding pleased. “That is one of the most important things to understand about how to use a **Charm**. Always make sure you know exactly what it will do. Don’t rely on what people tell you—make sure that you know.” From beneath the **Charm** desk, Rose took a leather-bound book titled *Ancient Charm Index* and handed it to Tod.

“This lists all one hundred and sixty-nine Ancient **Charms**,” Rose said. “They are indexed in three ways: design of key, name of **Charm**, effects of **Charm**. Many of the effects sections will be blank, as for some we have no information at all. You will also find the **Charm Chant** by most of them, but again, not all.”

Ten minutes later, Tod had matched her sketches of the lockers with the entries in the index. She showed Rose the one she thought referred to her key. It was named StarChaser.

Rose put on a tiny pair of pink-glass spectacles and peered at the minute faded writing in the book. “StarChaser,” she murmured. “Well, you’ve chosen an odd one there, I must say. We’ve got no information about it at all.”

“Oh.” Tod felt disappointed.

“However,” Rose said cheerily, “I have a feeling that you’re going to find it out for us. But first let’s see if you’ve picked the right locker.”

Tod had a strange feeling as she climbed the ladder, and it wasn’t because of its teetering height. She felt as though she were climbing toward

something really important in her life. At the top of the ladder, she looked closely at the locker. Like the key, it was a dull silver color—pure silver leaf—and etched into it was a scattering of tiny dark blue stars. It looked very mysterious. Tod began to feel excited.

The key turned easily and the locker's little door swung open. Tod glanced down at Rose, who was looking up with a broad smile. "Well done!" she called. "Right the first time! Not one Apprentice has ever done that. Now see what's inside."

A little nervously, Tod put her hand into the darkness of the locker. She was surprised to find how deep it was—her whole arm had disappeared into it before the tips of her fingers at last managed to touch the back wall. At first Tod thought that the locker was empty: all she could feel were its polished smooth sides. But as her fingers fluttered like trapped butterflies against the silvery back of the locker, a small box made itself known beneath them.

With the key back in its place inside the **Charm** desk, Tod and Rose sat gazing at the box. Like the locker, it was covered in battered silver leaf with the dark ghosts of stars scattered across it. Just looking at it made Tod shiver.

"Are you going to open it?" Rose prompted.

Tod hesitated. She felt strangely nervous.

Rose smiled encouragingly. "Why don't you see what the **Charm Chant** says?" she suggested. "It's not here in the *Index* and I'd really like to add it."

Tod lifted the lid to the box. Inside lay a five-pointed star made of a thick, coppery metal with shifting blue patterns that moved over its surface like oil on water. The star had a random pattern of small holes strewn across it and was pierced with a central hexagonal hole. It lay on a scrap of grubby turquoise wool that smelled of oil.

"It won't bite," Rose said with a smile. "You can pick it up."

Nervously, Tod held the StarChaser in her palm. It was heavy and covered most of her hand—just a battered piece of metal that looked as though it had once been part of a machine. There was no sign of a **Charm Chant** inscribed on the uppermost side of the star, so Tod turned it over. That too was blank.

"No **Chant**?" Rose inquired.

“No. It must be in the box, I suppose,” Tod said.

But it wasn't. Tod and Rose even rolled back the wool lining of the box to see if the **Chant** was hidden beneath, but all they saw was plain silver, as smooth and unmarked as the day the box had been made. Rose fetched an **Enlarging Glass** and ran it slowly over both the box and the **Charm**, but she found nothing.

“Most peculiar,” Rose said. “It's not marked as an orphan.”

“An orphan?” asked Tod.

“That's what we call **Charms** that have lost their **Chants**. They're marked in the *Index*.” Rose checked the *Ancient Index* once again. “And this one isn't. I shall have to correct it.” Rose sighed. “I'm so sorry, Tod. This StarChaser is pretty useless; Ancient **Charms** always have to be started with a **Chant**. But you were clearly drawn to it for some reason. Why don't you keep it for a while?”

“Keep it?”

“I'll check it out as a long loan. You can get to know it. See if it tells you anything.” Rose smiled. “I've learned with **Charms** that you have to **Listen** to them sometimes. And not everyone can **Hear**. But I think if this **Charm** wants to tell anyone anything, you will be the one it chooses.”

Tod looked at the heavy metal star lying quiet and warm on her hand. It felt to her as though it belonged somewhere she knew, but had not yet found. “Thank you,” she said.

“On one condition,” Rose said. “If you find out what the **Charm** is for, you will tell me. Okay?”

“You'll be the first to know,” Tod said.

For the rest of the afternoon Tod sat making notes on the *Ancient Charm Index*, aware of the great weight of the StarChaser **Charm** snug in its box and sitting deep in her pocket. By the time Tod had finished her notes, the StarChaser had begun to feel as if it were part of her.

Before she left, Tod helped Rose wash up the FizzFroot mugs. Twilight was falling and through the sparkling window—Rose kept a clean kitchen—Tod could see candles flickering in the attic windows of the houses that lined the Moat. She folded up the drying cloth and looked out the window.

“I love this time of the day,” Rose commented. “All the candles being lit. And the torches blazing up along Wizard Way.”

“And the Forest looking so dark and scary.” Tod shivered. “I’m so glad I’m here and not out there. I never want to be in the Forest at night again. Ever. Oh . . . Isn’t there a light in the old Infirmary?”

Rose peered over Tod’s shoulder. “So there is. Candlelight.”

“I suppose they’re getting ready for the party,” Tod said.

Rose clicked her tongue disapprovingly. “I don’t know why Septimus allows those parties,” she said. “It’s a big mistake.”

“He says it keeps trouble out of the Castle,” Tod replied loyally.

“Those parties bring trouble right up to our doorstep,” Rose said. “Which is too close for my liking.”

Tod did not disagree.

A few minutes later, Tod and Rose emerged from the **Charm** Chamber into the lobby. They were both pleased to see that Jo-Jo Heap had gone.

“I wonder if he found what he was looking for?” Tod said.

“Hmm,” Rose replied. “I rather hope he didn’t.”

Tod rather hoped so too.

WIZARD SANDWICHES

Dusk was falling by the time Tod said good-bye to Rose. With her hand in her pocket clutching the warm metal of the StarChaser, Tod walked dreamily out of the door and along the wood-paneled passageway that led to the silver spiral stairs. These were, like much of the Wizard Tower, powered by the ancient **Magyk** that took its energy from the great block of lapis lazuli that formed the bedrock of the tower. The stairs moved constantly, turning like a massive corkscrew. At this time of day they were busy with Wizards returning to their rooms. Tod stood in the soft light of the corridor, waiting for three empty steps—it was considered bad manners for anyone, especially an Apprentice, to crowd someone out by occupying the immediate step above or below.

While she waited, Tod drew the StarChaser from her pocket and let it sit heavy in her palm. She gazed at it intently, convinced that now she was alone with it she would be able to see the **Chant**, which it was keeping only for her eyes. The StarChaser remained as unmarked as ever, but as she

looked, Tod thought she caught ancient echoes of a mechanical thrum. She was so entranced that when there was a space on the stairs she automatically stepped on, only to realize some four floors up that she was going the wrong way. She leaped off and found herself on the eighteenth floor.

Bother, Tod thought. I really do not want to be here.

The eighteenth floor of the Wizard Tower was a strange place. Like most of the floors it consisted of a central corridor with rooms leading off, but it differed from the others in that it still had its original decoration: slate walls with thousands of silver-leaf pictograms in vertical columns that ran from ceiling to floor, the translation of which was kept locked in the safe at the end of the corridor. Like Tod's StarChaser, this place too was full of ancient echoes, but unlike the StarChaser they were more than a little disturbing, for it was here that Septimus held the new **Darke** course for final year Apprentices.

Tod knew that only those in their final year were allowed to set foot on the eighteenth floor, and the echoes of lingering **Darke** spells spooked her. As soon as the stairs reversed direction, she jumped back on and with a feeling of great relief, headed down into brighter spaces.

The **Darke** echoes had unsettled Tod and she felt afraid for her StarChaser. Remembering that Rose had told her the best way to keep a **Charm** safe was to wear it close, she got off the stairs at the seventh floor and hurried along to the Junior Girls' Apprentice Dorm. The dorm was set out with twelve tented spaces; Tod's had recently acquired a new design—silver stars on dark blue in honor of a certain tent in a distant desert. Tod carried her much more substantial star into her tent and from her desk beside the bed she took a spare leather bootlace. She threaded it through the center of the StarChaser and put it around her neck. Tod already wore her **PathFinder** around her neck, and the two sat well together, as if they were old acquaintances. She put the StarChaser's empty silver box into her pocket and hurried off. She was looking forward to spending the evening with her best friends from her home village, Oskar and Ferdie Sarn.

On Wizard Way the torches atop their tall silver posts were being lit, and the smell of spices from the curry cart made Tod hungry for supper. She wandered along, enjoying the relaxed evening slowness. She was heading

for Wizard Sandwiches—a café frequented by Apprentices, scribes and the occasional witch—where they had planned to meet.

Tod spotted Ferdie and Oskar hanging around outside, their red curly hair shining in the twilight with the typical **PathFinder** sheen. She waved and the Sarn twins hurried to join her. Quickly Ferdie took one arm and Oskar the other.

“We had to wait outside,” Oskar said.

“You’ll see why when we go past the window,” Ferdie added.

The twins walked Tod toward Wizard Sandwiches and as they went by, Tod glanced into the café window. “Oh!” she said.

“See?” said Ferdie.

“There’s no way we’re going in there to sit with *witches*,” Oskar said.

“But aren’t those the nice ones?” Tod asked.

Ferdie pulled a face. “There is no such thing as a nice witch,” she declared.

Tod felt much the same. They had all suffered a terrifying time at the hands of the Wendron Witch coven. Tod willingly allowed Ferdie and Oskar to sweep her away, off to Snake Slipway, where Ferdie lodged with Lucy, Simon and William Heap.

“We’ll have to be quiet,” Ferdie warned. “Simon’s not well. Something horrible has happened to his eye.”

“What kind of horrible?” Oskar asked, sounding interested.

Ferdie lowered her voice. “I don’t know. But don’t say anything. Lucy is really scared, and she doesn’t want William to know.”

Tod said nothing. Her visit to Simon that morning had been Wizard Tower business, which was not for her to talk about.

“I bet William *does* know,” Oskar said.

Ferdie was inclined to agree. “I think he does. He was very quiet when he got home from school.”

“So why don’t we take him out in a paddleboat?” Oskar suggested. “That should cheer him up.”

And so the three friends—known to one another as the Tribe of Three—set off to extract William Heap from the sadness of a frightened household and hire one of his uncle Rupert’s paddleboats.

From the other side of the window, Ariel and Star watched them go. “That’s those kids,” Ariel said. “You know, those snow sprites that Morwenna nearly threw in the fire.”

“Yeah, they had a lucky escape,” Star said.

“Thanks to us,” said Ariel.

“Not that they bothered to actually say thank you,” said Star. “Ungrateful little tykes.”

Ariel shrugged. “No one ever thanks witches. It’s a fact of life.”

“Queen Jenna’s all right, though,” said Star.

“Yeah, she’s okay. While she has a use for us, at least,” said Ariel. “Are you finishing that Tank or shall I?”

One of the perks of their job for the Queen was free food at Wizard Sandwiches, and the witches were making the most of it. Between them was a large plate on which lay the remains of the biggest sandwich that the café produced: the Tank. The Tank was two loaves of bread, hollowed out and filled with a savory bean mixture then stuck together with thick gravy. The two witches had personalized the mix with extra chili and chunks of fried squirrel—which was, Star thought, a mistake. She had a squirrel bone stuck between her teeth. “You have it,” she said.

While Ariel chewed her way through the last of the Tank, the remaining member of staff, the washing-up boy, began to close up. The witches had been there the whole afternoon keeping customers away; all the staff had gone except for him, and he wanted to go home. He had already wiped the tables, cleared away the menus and counted the takings. He now set about noisily putting the unoccupied chairs up on the tables and then in desperation started mopping the floor, spraying water everywhere.

Ariel and Star watched him impassively as they very slowly finished their pudding: sweet banana rolls topped with chocolate sprinkles. Then they wiped their fingers on the tablecloth and sauntered out through the puddles.

“So,” said Ariel, as the boy hastily locked the door behind them, “I suppose we had better go and deliver Marissa’s message to the Ormnap team.”

Star looked at the lights of Wizard Way; she saw the happy pottering of people wandering along, taking in the evening air, gazing in the lighted

shop windows. The thought of returning to the darkness of the nighttime Forest was not attractive. “Why bother?” she said.

“Yeah,” Ariel agreed. “Rude cow. She can tell them herself.”

Ariel and Star linked arms and set off for Gothyk Grotto, a shop selling what was known in the Castle as Witchery-Fakery. At night Gothyk Grotto—or the Grot as it was affectionately known—became a meeting place for the more goth-minded teens. It was a place where witches were always welcome. As the evening gave way to night, in a cobwebby corner at the back of the Grot, Ariel and Star began the **Darke** card game of Hangman Jack.

THREE IN THE MORNING

In the Junior Girls’ Apprentice Dorm in the Wizard Tower, Tod was asleep with the StarChaser under her pillow. In her dreams she moved slowly through a dark space dotted with tiny lights that guided her toward something familiar, but as yet unknown. Just before three in the morning Tod woke with a start, convinced she was falling. Dozily, she looked up at the stars on the tented canopy above her bed and then, as three tinny chimes from the Drapers Yard Clock drifted into the dorm, she slipped back into her quiet, purposeful dream.

In Gothyk Grotto the candles were burning low, but Ariel and Star played on. As was so often the case with Hangman Jack, the game had expanded to include the onlookers—all teens, all dressed in varying shades of black. Thirteen were now gathered around the table: the Grot’s favorite number. The atmosphere was buzzing with tension, for the stakes were high: a minimum of five luminous eyeballs was now required to stay in the game. It was shaping up to be a long night—someone had just found a new box of eyeballs in the storeroom.

Across the Moat in the Infirmary, Marissa was awake and sitting at the nurses’ desk in the middle of the empty ward. In front of her was the bag of Kraan and on the desk a dark brown scrap of paper that looked as though it had been scorched. On the paper was a spiral of tiny words written in black

ink, very precisely lettered. This was the **Engender** and it was, as Marissa would have put it, freaking her out.

Marissa was not the world's best reader and there were some words she had never seen before and was unsure how to say. However, she knew enough about **Darke Magyk** to recognize one particularly terrifying word, written in all its horror, at the very end of the **Engender**. Marissa sat staring at the paper, her mind full of stories gleefully told around late-night campfires about stupid Wizards who had misread **Engenders** and the awful things that had happened to them as a result.

Marissa yawned. She was too tired to concentrate, she told herself, that was the trouble. She'd have a nap and take another look in the morning. She put the **Engender** back into the bag of Kraan and shoved the bag into the desk drawer. Then she went back to her hard hospital bed, wrapped herself up in the thin blanket and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Thousands of miles away, in Hospitable Gard, someone else was also in a deep, dreamless sleep: Oraton-Marr.

The Red Queen's Guards had returned, as they had promised. They watched impassively as Mitza and the Lady yelled, shook and pinched the sorcerer in increasingly desperate attempts to wake him. But Oraton-Marr was deep in the dark pit of his green lozenge slumber, and nothing could reach him.

At last, in desperation, Mitza and the Lady picked up the sorcerer's bed, bumped it down the stairs, and then, escorted by the guards, they carried him, snoring, through the silent streets to the Palace.

In a chamber deep within the Palace, the Red Queen surveyed her catch: one useless sorcerer and two terrified and equally useless women. She had them all thrown into a dungeon and then she turned to the Captain of the Guard. "The girl—that little witch—you said she had a key to a castle?"

The Captain waited five long seconds then replied, "Yes, Your Majesty. I questioned the guard to whom she spoke. She told him it was the key to a castle, Your Majesty. She said it was something you wanted to get your hands on, Your Majesty."

The Red Queen smiled. All was not yet lost. "Go," she told the Captain. "Bring me that little witch. *Now.*"

TRACKING

After a fruitless visit to Hospitable Gard, the Captain went home to his wife and bade her a tearful farewell. There was no way, he said, he would survive this mission. The witch was gone and he had no idea where. His wife waited out his tears and then, as the sun rose, she took the Captain to the sorcerer her family had used for years. In a tiny room at the top of a turret, in return for a whole year of the Captain's salary plus the use of their firstborn as a runner, an ancient sorcerer, bald as an egg, handed the Captain a small green ball covered in finely stitched leather. It was a new, untried **Tracker** ball.

"I won it in a bet," the sorcerer told them. "It was a wild night down in the Port of the Singing Sands and I gambled my head of hair against his **Tracker** ball over the turn of the cards." The sorcerer looked up at the bemused expression on the Captain's face. His wife, who had heard the joke many times before, wore a fixed smile as the sorcerer grinned and rubbed his hand over his smooth, bald head. "I won that night. But not the next. Always stop while you are ahead," he said. "Or at least, while you have a head of hair."

The wife of the Captain of the Guard laughed politely and she nudged her husband to do the same—it was wise to humor sorcerers. When the laughter died away, she asked, "Could you tell us how to use this **Magykal** thing, O Wise One?"

"You touch it to the person and then it will **Track** them," the sorcerer replied.

The Captain's wife was aghast; she had forgotten what an idiot their family sorcerer was. But she must make the best of it. Sorcerers were a close-knit bunch and she could not now change her mind and go to another. "What a charming idea," she said, trying her best to smile. "And if the person one wishes to **Track** is not actually there at the time, what does one do?"

The sorcerer frowned and rubbed his head in thought. "An interesting question," he said. "Yes, indeed . . . most thought-provoking."

The Captain and his wife waited for an answer. At last they got it. "I believe it is possible to wrap the **Tracker** ball in an article of the person's

clothing and leave it for . . . hmm . . . let me see now . . . yes . . . thirteen minutes.”

“Thirteen,” the Captain’s wife said sharply. “So do I understand this to be a **Darke** device?”

The sorcerer looked at her with irritation. He didn’t like clients who were too clever. “It contains an element of the **Darke**, madam,” he replied frostily. “As do all **Tracker** balls. Indeed, how else would they operate? After all, they rarely **Track** people with their informed consent, ha-ha. And to operate without consent requires a touch of **Darke Magyk**. As you are no doubt aware. You may go now.”

The Captain’s wife knew that when a sorcerer told you to go, you went. And you did not say: *Suppose we don’t have any clothing, you stupid old man. What do we do then?* However much you wanted to.

The dejected couple wandered back home in silence. At last the Captain’s wife spoke. “Cecil, I have been thinking. We must go to that Hospitable Gard place and get a piece of the witch’s clothing.”

The Captain looked gloomy. “She will have packed it all up and taken it with her.”

“She sounds a scatty young thing,” his wife said. “She’s bound to have left something behind.”

“But how do I know what clothes belong to *her*?” the Captain asked plaintively.

His wife sighed out loud. “From your description of the other women living there I should have thought it would be obvious.” She looked at her husband and decided that he was in such a state that he wouldn’t even recognize a little frilly nightdress with *I Belong to a Witch* embroidered across its front. “I’ll come with you as part of the Queen’s Guard,” she said. “You can say you’ve got a warrant to search the place. It’ll be easy. I’ll know a piece of witch stuff when I see one.”

The Captain looked at his wife with an expression of relief. Everything would be fine if she was with him. And then he remembered something. “But Celia, you can’t be part of the Queen’s Guard,” he said. “You’re not a man.”

“Oh, do shut up, Cecil,” said his wife.

The housekeeper at Hospitable Gard was cleaning at the very top of the tower when she heard pounding on the front door six floors down. She was not in a good mood when she at last flung it open. "What," she demanded, "do you want?" She saw the full dress uniform of the Captain of the Queen's Guard and nearly fainted. "Oh, sir," she said, "oh, I am so sorry. I was not expecting . . ."

"I have a search warrant," said the Captain. "Let us in. At once."

The housekeeper stood aside for the Captain and his young soldier. The housekeeper waited for more to troop in but she was surprised to see that there were no others. She waited respectfully for the Captain to speak. He said nothing. The housekeeper began to feel nervous. She thought she saw the young soldier nudge the Captain in the ribs but she told herself that was not possible. And then at last the Captain spoke.

"I have reason to believe there is a witch here," he said.

The housekeeper was shocked. She did not like witches. "There is no one here, sir. They are removed to the Palace. I am cleaning up their mess. Mucky baggages the lot of them."

"Stand aside, woman," said the Captain. "I intend to search the tower."

The housekeeper sank thankfully onto one of the divans and watched the Captain and his oddly feminine soldier hurry away up the stairs. She swung her feet up, lay her head on the soft nest of cushions and fell asleep.

Ten minutes later the Captain and his wife clattered down the stairs. In her hands the wife held a tiny green slip that smelled of patchouli. The Captain agreed that there was no way either of the women could have fit into that. "Although I suppose one of them could have worn it as a scarf," he said, doubts beginning to grow once more.

"Don't be ridiculous, Cecil," his wife told him.

The housekeeper opened her eyes dozily, decided she must be dreaming and went back to sleep.

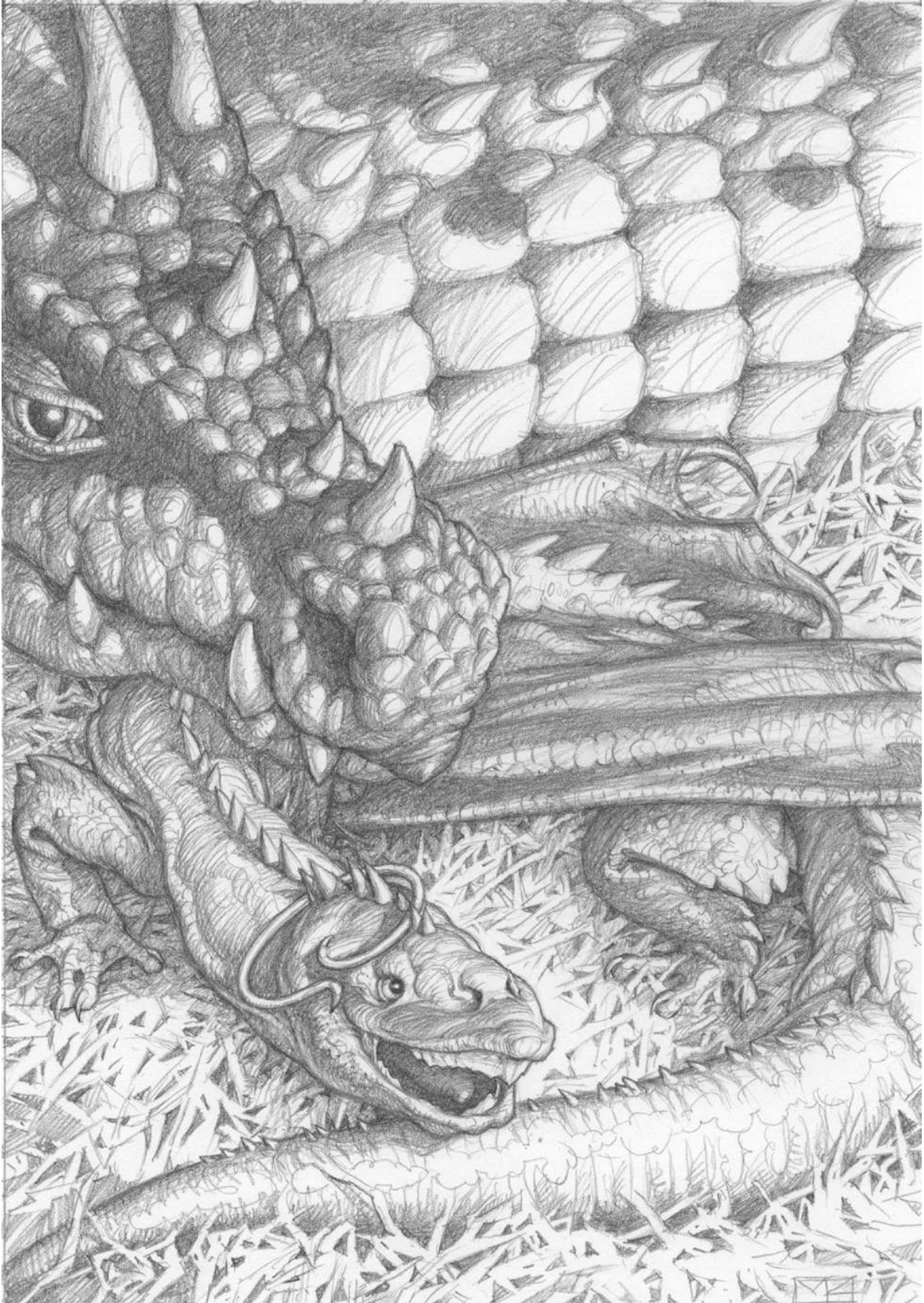
The **Tracker** ball spent its thirteen minutes wrapped in the piece of patchouli-scented silk. The Captain of the Queen's Guard spent the thirteen minutes sharpening his sword, and his wife spent it wondering if the Captain was worth all the trouble. Half an hour later, the Captain's wife waved her husband good-bye. She watched him follow the **Tracker** ball as

it bounced away down the alley. She hoped he would come back, but she thought it unlikely.

The Captain followed the ball as it rolled and tumbled along. It moved fast and at times he struggled to keep sight of it. Hot and flustered, carrying his sword and a knapsack, he attracted many amused glances: the Captain of the Queen's Guard chasing after a ball was not something often seen.

The **Tracker** ball moved fast, and the Captain was soon out of breath in the afternoon heat. He just about managed to keep it in sight until suddenly, with an enormous bounce, it flew over a high wall and disappeared. The Captain ran to the only door in the wall and found it was locked. In desperation he threw himself against it, but it did not move. He pummeled the door with his fists, shouted, screamed, and then, as people began leaning out of nearby windows to see what the fuss was about, he sank to the ground in tears.

That night the Captain left a note for his wife under the pot by their front door and then he walked out of the city. At first light he hired a camel. He didn't know where it was going. All he knew was that he would never return.





PART III

THE ORMLET

It was a beautiful morning in the Castle—too good, Marwick told his self-defense class, to stay inside. And so, on the wide sweep of Palace lawns that led down to the river, the class was out in the sunshine, practicing blocking with staves. The class was a mixed bunch, chosen because each had once been in mortal danger. Among them were Tod, Oskar and Ferdie. There were an assortment of scribes from the Manuscriptorium and a few Apprentices from the Wizard Tower including, much to Tod's discomfort, a certain Drammer Makken. There was also, at her own insistence, the Castle Queen, Jenna. Watching them from a grassy bank was a pale, convalescing Sam Heap and his brother Septimus, looking rather hot in his heavy purple ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes.

The class instructor, Marwick, was a skinny, wild-looking young man with his hair worn in dreadlocks. Marwick had clearly used his skills for real in the past and many of the younger ones were a little in awe of him. But even Marwick could not compete with the sight of the Ormlet suddenly appearing over the tall hedge that separated the Dragon Field from the Palace lawns.

With a flash of blue, a flutter of spiky wings and a flick of a long, floppy tail, the Ormlet rose into the air like a rocket. In the field behind the hedge a large green dragon named Spit Fyre watched his adopted baby with an expression of pride. The expression worn by everyone else was more wary. Many were wondering anxiously what the creature was going to do *this* time.

Tod was not worried. Like Ferdie and Oskar she loved to see the Ormlet flying free. At a distance the creature looked like a tiny electric blue dragon as it soared high into the clear sky. Oskar followed it closely, trying to commit to memory the way it moved: quick, unpredictable, erratic—just like an automaton. Which was, Oskar thought, perfect. For it was Oskar's dearest wish that one day, when the Ormlet had become an adult Orm and was nothing more than a huge hollow tube eating its way through rock, he

might be able to create its mechanical twin so that the joyful flight of the Ormlet would never be forgotten.

The Ormlet threw itself into a succession of complex spins. The creature had grown to appreciate the attention of humans. It loved the gasps of wonder at its acrobatics, but even more it loved the screams of alarm as it swooped down on unsuspecting victims—only to swerve past them at the very last minute. That morning it was thrilled to see so many upturned faces watching it.

In addition to the self-defense class, the Ormlet's audience comprised passengers on a pleasure boat tour around the Castle, a group of farmhands mowing a meadow on the opposite bank and, from an upstairs window at the Palace, a new and highly excitable wolfhound puppy called Millicent. To the background of frantic yapping, the Ormlet now launched into a series of breathtaking loops and spirals, feeling the cool morning air rushing by its shimmering leathery skin and delighting in the moment.

Queen Jenna squinted up into the sky, watching the unpredictable flash of blue. The Ormlet was a responsibility that Jenna felt keenly. She had promised Septimus that she would keep it safe with Spit Fyre until the time came for it to **TransfOrm**. But the task had not been an easy one. For some reason, the presence of the Ormlet had attracted the attentions of the Wendron Witch coven. But at least, Jenna thought as she watched the Ormlet throw itself into a double loop and twist, that threat was gone now. A smile crossed Jenna's face as she remembered the early-morning visit from her faithful witch spies, Ariel and Star. They had looked disheveled and weary with dark rings under their eyes. They had obviously had a difficult journey through the nighttime Forest, but even so they had struggled through to give her the message that the Wendron Witches were no longer intending to steal the Ormlet. That, thought Jenna, was true loyalty. And so, after Ariel and Star had gone to their Palace rooms for a well-deserved rest, Jenna had stood down the guard on the Dragon Kennel.

Welcome though the message was, it did not take away the difficulties of playing host to the Ormlet. The snappy little reptile was accused of a series of crimes and misdemeanors.

The charge sheet was as follows:

For the Prosecution: Biting the boot of Barney Pot, the dragon keeper, and eating three of his toes.

For the Defense: This was a mistake. And the toes did not taste good.

For the Prosecution: Escaping into the Palace garden and eating the entire afternoon tea for the Garden Party of Port Officials.

For the Defense: The officials were very boring.

For the Prosecution: The disappearance of all the Palace cats.

For the Defense: What cats?

For the Prosecution: Overturning two small boats in the river.

For the Defense: The Ormlet cannot be held responsible for spectators all choosing to stand on the same side of a boat.

There were also a few crimes as yet to be recorded: biting off the left little finger of witch novice Selina Simpkins (on which she wore her favorite silver ring) and the theft of assorted small, shiny objects. Like a giant magpie, the Ormlet with its delicate, prehensile lips would lift a sparkling piece of jewelry left near an open window, but if the shiny thing happened to be a ring on the finger of an annoying witch poking the Ormlet with a long stick, so much the better.

However, that morning the Ormlet looked so joyful and innocent that even Jenna forgot its wrongdoings and watched in delight.

The Ormlet flew for the sheer joy of the sensation of air rushing beneath its wings and the warmth of the sun on its shimmering, leathery skin. Recently a feeling of impending doom had taken root in the Ormlet's brain. It didn't know why, but it had a presentiment that things were about to change—and not for the better. On that bright and beautiful morning, the Ormlet was trying to outfly the dark fate that it felt creeping up behind it.

At the zenith of its arc the Ormlet stopped and hovered far above the river, flapping its wings so rapidly that they were a barely visible blur. It looked down and far below saw the upturned faces of its admirers. It watched the shimmer of the reflections on the surface of the river, the gleam of the polished brass on the river boat and then, on the Palace lawns, it saw something irresistible—a deliciously bright sparkle of gold shining on the head of a young woman in red.

A thrill of joy went through the Ormlet's thin, sharp nerves. It folded its wings and tipped downward so it looked like a sleek, blue arrow pointing to

earth. A gasp drifted up from below as it spiraled down in a spectacular nosedive. The Ormlet waited just long enough to garner a satisfying tally of screams from the riverboat passengers before it pulled out of the dive no more than three feet above their heads. To the background of applause from the relieved passengers, the Ormlet proceeded to zigzag like a delinquent firecracker just above the water. It then took a sudden right turn, shot up the Palace lawns and—locking onto its target—flew straight for Queen Jenna, its brilliant blue eyes focused on the twinkling gold of the circlet that she wore around her hair. The self-defense class scattered like a bow wave before the onrushing missile.

Jenna grabbed Marwick's stave and stood ready for the attack. Oskar leaped into the air, waving his hands as though trying to catch a ball. "Ormie!" he yelled. "Ormie!"

"Oskar!" screamed Tod, tackling his knees and throwing him to the ground out of the path of the sharp snout, dangerous as a spear. The Ormlet whizzed by so close that Tod could feel the rush of air and hear the buzz of its wings. She sat up and saw the flash of blue make a sharp right turn and zoom to the back of Jenna's head. Tod was impressed with Jenna's lightning reaction. The Queen wheeled around, swung her stave whistling through the air, but she was a fraction of a second too late. The Ormlet's dexterous lips had already lifted the golden circlet from her head. Jenna succeeded in landing a glancing blow on the barb of its tail but all that did was speed the creature upon its way, a ring of gold hanging from its mouth like a huge, misplaced earring. The Ormlet soared into the sky wearing its earring with pride, along with what looked like a very smug smile.

LAST CHANCE

Two shouts went up simultaneously, both from young men but from opposite directions. Tod watched the two men race toward the scattered self-defense class. One was her tutor, Septimus Heap; the other, who came hurtling through a hole in the hedge that separated the Dragon Field from the Palace gardens, wore a scuffed leather jerkin and trousers covered in bite marks. He was, Tod guessed, Barney Pot, the Palace dragon keeper.

Despite his limp Barney reached them first. Hastily brushing strands of straw from his jerkin, he said, "I am so, so sorry, Queen Jenna."

"It's not your fault, Barney," Jenna replied, wiping the Orm spit from her hair. "Anyway, I've come off much more lightly than you did."

Breathless, Septimus joined them. "Only by luck, Jen," he said. "It could have bitten your head off."

Barney looked horrified.

Tod could see that Jenna was more shaken than she cared to admit. Which explained why the Queen rounded on Septimus and said, "No, Sep, it could *not* have bitten my head off. I was ready for it. And this is exactly why I asked Marwick to teach us self-defense. So that wherever the attack comes from—Orm, witch or . . . or *whatever*, we are ready."

Septimus backpedaled fast. "Okay, Jen. I do see the point of the class. Really I do." He grinned at his old friend Marwick. "And you have the best teacher possible."

Marwick put his arm around Septimus's shoulder. "Always the diplomat, eh, Sep?"

Septimus grinned ruefully. "I have to be," he said.

Marwick addressed the class. He praised everyone for taking what he called "successful avoidance action" and declared that practice was over for the day. Then he took Sam off for a reviving drink at Wizard Sandwiches.

As the class trooped back to the Palace to collect their things, Oskar saw Septimus go over to Lucy Heap. Lucy was supervising the construction of the Orm Pit—the secure place beneath the Wizard Tower where the Ormlet was destined to spend its time as a cocoon and embark upon its new life as a mature Orm. Alarm bells rang for Oskar. He dropped back from Ferdie and Tod and changed course with a rather comical sideways shuffle, trying to hear what Septimus was saying. He need not have taken the trouble. Lucy's reply rang out loud and clear.

"Are you totally crazy? Do two weeks' work in twenty-four hours?"

A placating murmur came from Septimus.

"I don't care how 'essential to safety' it is, Septimus," Lucy told him. "Unlike you, I cannot just snap my fingers and make things happen. And neither can my builders."

More murmuring followed and Lucy seemed conciliatory. "Well . . . I suppose it might be just possible. But I'll need extra help. And I can't

promise anything. Understand?”

“Thank you, Lucy,” Septimus said. “I’m sorry to ask this. I know you have enough to worry about already. How is Simon?”

Lucy looked like she might burst into tears. She bit her lip and said tersely, “Just the same.”

“Lucy,” said Septimus, “I was thinking that maybe he should be in the Sick Bay, where we can look after him.”

Lucy shook her head. “Si wants to be at home.” She lowered her voice. “He has nightmares. Shouts in his sleep. It wouldn’t be good for the others in Sick Bay.”

Septimus gave Lucy a hug. “Well, you know best. Just tell me if there is anything I can do.”

Lucy nodded and strode off, the ribbons on her cuffs flowing behind her as she went. She didn’t want anyone to see the tears running down her face.

“Hey, Oskar.” The voice behind Oskar made him jump. It was Jenna. She smiled and said, “It’s a lovely day. Too sunny for sighing.”

Oskar smiled shyly. He liked Jenna, but he still felt a little overawed by the Castle Queen. He was trying to think of a suitable reply when Septimus appeared.

Septimus nodded to Oskar and then turned to Jenna. “The Ormlet is out of control; we can’t risk it being at large a moment longer. It will be going into the Orm Pit tomorrow afternoon.”

Jenna laughed. “If you can catch it.”

Oskar knew it was rude to interrupt a conversation between the Queen and the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, but he couldn’t stop himself. “Please don’t lock Ormie up,” he begged. “*Please*. Let her have her last days of freedom. She won’t be able to fly for much longer.”

Septimus looked cross at being interrupted, but Jenna was more understanding. “It’s true, Sep. This stage won’t last long. And after that the poor creature’s going to spend the rest of its life like a blind mole beneath the ground, eating rock.”

Septimus was not to be convinced. “The Ormlet is a pest, Jen—and besides, there are other considerations. We must be careful not to lose it at the very last minute. Its behavior has become so erratic that I would not be surprised if it suddenly flew away and we never saw it again.”

“Spit Fyre would soon be after it,” Jenna said. “He’s besotted with the creature; you know he is.”

Septimus sighed. “Yes. And then we’d lose Spit Fyre again.” He turned to Oskar. “I’m sorry, Oskar. My mind is made up. For the good of the Castle, it is time for the Ormlet to enter the Orm Pit.”

Oskar bit his lip and stared at the ground.

Tod and Ferdie had joined them and heard the last few exchanges. “Please, Septimus,” Tod said, “would you consider giving the Ormlet one more chance?”

“*Please?*” Ferdie and Oskar added for good measure.

Under the combined onslaught Septimus weakened. “What kind of chance?” he asked warily.

“Suppose it gave the circlet back?” Tod said.

Septimus laughed. “And apologized and said it would never do it again?” he asked. “Well, that might do, I suppose.”

“I could talk to Ormie and tell her she has to be good from now on,” Oskar offered. “And then tomorrow when you come to take her to the Orm Pit, if she lets you take the circlet, would that be okay? That would really prove she was behaving better, wouldn’t it?”

Jenna weighed in. “I *would* like to get my circlet back, Sep. And Oskar does seem to have a way with the Ormlet. So how about it—one last chance?”

Septimus could never say no to Jenna for long. “All right,” he said. “One last chance.” He looked at Oskar. “That Ormlet has to give the circlet back. And it has to be very well behaved from now on. No more dive-bombing, no more zigzagging down Wizard Way at knee height, no more pooping on people’s heads, okay?”

“Okay,” Oskar said.

Tod and Ferdie exchanged worried glances. There was no way Oskar could fix all that. No way at all.

DRAMMER MAKKEN

Oskar knew Drammer Makken was trouble. And he knew from the way Drammer was staring that he wanted to talk. But Oskar did not want to talk to Drammer. The boy scared him. In the last month or so Drammer Makken had broadened out and grown a good few inches taller. He was now bigger than his older brother, Newt, and a whole lot nastier, too. So as Tod hurried away with Septimus, Oskar hung back with Ferdie. He watched Drammer walk away with his distinctive rolling gait, like a sailor looking for trouble on a night ashore. Oskar wanted to give him plenty of time to get ahead.

Once Drammer was safely out of sight, Oskar and Ferdie headed up Wizard Way. They stopped outside a small shop with the sign above reading: *Number Thirteen, Magykal Manuscriptorium and Spell Checkers Incorporated.*

“Have a nice day, Oskie,” Ferdie said. And then she added, “I’m sorry.”

“What for?” asked Oskar.

“Um. Well. I promised Lucy I’d help her today. With the Orm Pit. And I know how you feel about that place.”

“Hey, Ferd, that’s okay,” Oskar said. “I know it has to be done. But the Ormlet’s not going in there just yet.”

Ferdie smiled. She hoped Oskar was right.

Acting more confident than he felt, Oskar gave Ferdie a cheery wave and pushed open the Manuscriptorium door with its distinctive *ping*. He walked jauntily through the front office, giving Foxy, who was on the desk, the PathFinder sign for “hello.” Foxy returned the sign—a flat outward palm with splayed fingers held at a 45-degree tilt away from the body. Foxy smiled. He liked Oskar and his weird signs.

Oskar headed through the door in the screen that divided the front office from the actual Manuscriptorium and stepped into a high-ceilinged room where twenty-one desks were arranged in rows, each with a long, dangling light above it. This was where the scribes worked, copying spells, **Charms** and any other documents that were too **Magykal** or complicated to be printed. Oskar padded quietly around the edge, gathering murmured hellos as he went. Although he did not work upstairs with the scribes but helped out in the basement in the Conservation and Preservation department, Oskar was a popular member of the Manuscriptorium. He had made the Conservation department much more accessible by happily explaining what

they did there and persuading its incumbent, the reclusive Ephaniah Grebe, to set up a course in making automata.

As Oskar headed around the dimly lit edge of the Manuscriptorium, someone laid a heavy hand on his arm. “Hey.” Drammer Makken’s voice came out of the gloom.

Oskar jumped. “What are *you* doing here?”

Drammer contrived to look hurt. “I hoped we might have walked back together, Oskie.”

Oskar bridled. “Only my friends call me that.”

Drammer steadfastly maintained his expression. “Well, I hope we are friends. Seeing as we’re *workmates* for the next month.”

Oskar’s face fell. In a scheme set up to foster understanding between both institutions, Apprentices from the Wizard Tower now did a month’s rotation in the Manuscriptorium, while every scribe did a month at the Wizard Tower.

Drammer looked pleased with the effect he was having. “Yeah, a whole *month* away from the Wizzer.” “The Wizzer” was a new slang for the Wizard Tower, favored by the more senior Apprentices. Drammer, who hung out with many of his older brother’s friends, used it whenever he could. He grinned at Oskar. “Of course I won’t be spending much time with you backroom boys down in the basement.”

“Ah.” Oskar tried not to sound relieved.

“My skills are more suitable for the complexities of the Hermetic Chamber.”

“Right.” Oskar did not sound convinced. Beetle, the Chief Hermetic Scribe, was very picky about who he allowed into the innermost sanctum of the Manuscriptorium. “Gotta go,” Oskar said, edging toward the basement stairs. “I’m a bit busy.”

Drammer stepped in front of him. “Shame about the Ormlet,” he said.

“Oh. Yes,” Oskar muttered. He didn’t want to talk about something he cared for so much with Drammer Makken.

“It’s not going to like being put in prison,” Drammer said.

“No.”

Drammer pushed the point home. “It’s so sad. Losing its last precious moments of freedom.”

Oskar looked at Drammer closely. Was he mocking him? Or was he genuine? “Yes, it is,” Oskar agreed. “But it might not happen. I’m going to ask for the afternoon off and then I’ll try to explain to Ormie—I mean the Ormlet—how important it is for her to behave.”

“Think that will work?” asked Drammer in a voice that skirted the edges of scathing.

Oskar didn’t, but he was not going to admit it. He shrugged. “It’s worth a try.”

“Yeah. But I’ve got a better idea. I can get you”—Drammer looked around and dropped his voice to a whisper—“some *stuff*.”

“What stuff?” Oskar asked suspiciously.

“I was in the Wild Book Store yesterday. There are some **Charms** there that would do the trick. You know. Calm it down a bit.” Drammer leaned close to Oskar in a confidential manner. “You know it’s never going to give that circlet back, don’t you?”

Oskar feared as much. But he was not going to give Drammer the satisfaction of agreeing.

Drammer continued in a low murmur. “We all know that the EOW only made a fuss to impress the Queen. But if *you* get the circlet back, you can give it to him, then he can give it to the Queen and she’ll think he’s wonderful and all the Ormlet trouble will be forgotten. Am I right or am I right?”

Oskar looked blank. He was trying to work out what an EOW was.

Drammer gave a heavy sigh to indicate that he was a paragon of patience dealing with a fool. “EOW? ExtraOrdinary Wizard? Septimus Heap? Got it now? Give him the circlet and all will be fine. Am I right or am I *right*?” Drammer folded his arms and looked very pleased with himself. “So, *Oskie*, I have the perfect solution: Languid Lizard **Charms**.”

“What do you mean?” Oskar asked, despite himself.

“I can get you some if you want,” Drammer said. “I’ve still got my pass. See?” Drammer showed Oskar his Wild Book Store pass—a clawed animal foot on a blue rope. Only one pass was available at any time, but it was not exactly sought after. No one chose to go into the Wild Book Store more than once. Except, it seemed, Drammer Makken.

Oskar did not trust Drammer, but the offer of the **Charms** was too tempting. Deep down he knew that merely talking to the Ormlet would do

nothing. “All right, then,” he said reluctantly. And then, because it felt rude not to, he added, “Thanks.”

“Any time, kiddo. Any time at all,” Drammer said with a smirk.

Drammer headed back to the front office with Oskar in tow. As they came in, Foxy looked up. He smiled at Oskar. “Back again?” he said.

“I’ve got the pass for the Wilds,” Drammer said, using the Manuscriptorium slang, much to Foxy’s obvious annoyance. “And Oskar wants something in there. Can I take him in?”

“No, you can’t,” Foxy told him curtly. “You’ve not done your safety certificate yet.” Foxy would have offered to take Oskar in himself, but that would have meant leaving Drammer Makken in charge of the front office. And, after what Beetle had called “serious office protocol malfunctions,” the Chief was insistent that only senior scribes staffed the desk. Besides, Foxy thought, he didn’t trust the Makken kid as far as he could throw him—and that was not far at all: Drammer was a heavy, square-set boy and Foxy a thin, somewhat weedy young man.

Drammer gave Oskar a sharp nudge in the ribs. “Um,” said Oskar. “Please, Foxy. Drammer promised to . . . um . . . look something up for me.”

“Look up what, exactly?” Foxy asked suspiciously.

“Lizards,” Drammer said. “Something about how their tails drop off. For the Ormlet project. Eh, Oskie?”

Oskar nodded. He felt really bad about lying, especially to Foxy. But then he thought of the Ormlet bound for its prison and he knew he had to do it.

Foxy knew about Oskar’s fascination with lizards and that he was building an automaton Orm with Ephaniah Grebe. “Okay, I’ll take you in,” he said, a little reluctantly. “Wait there and I’ll get someone to take over the desk.” With that Foxy hurried into the Manuscriptorium to find a senior scribe.

To Oskar’s dismay, Drammer sprang into action. He pressed the key into a claw-shaped depression in the door. It swung open, and from inside the Wild Book Store came a musty smell and a feral rustle that put Oskar in mind of creatures fighting in undergrowth. And then Drammer was inside and the door shut. Oskar watched both the door to the Manuscriptorium and

that to the Wild Book Store nervously. He wasn't sure who he wanted to appear first—Drammer or Foxy.

It was Drammer. No more than thirty seconds later, Drammer was back in the front office, hastily brushing off some small black feathers stuck in his hair. "Blasted Pteragon," he muttered. "It was guarding the Lizard Section. But I got the stuff. Want to see?" With that Drammer was out of the front door and into the open, with Oskar following on his heels.

Ten seconds later Foxy returned. "Oh!" he said to his companion, a senior scribe named Romilly. "They've gone. That's most unlike Oskar. He's usually so considerate."

Romilly picked a small black feather off the desk. "Hmm," she said. "He is. Unlike that Drammer boy . . ."

"Who is bad news," Foxy finished.

Romilly regarded the feather quizzically. "If I were you, Foxy, I'd put a second lock on the Wild Book Store."

"Yeah, so would I," Foxy said. He grinned at Romilly. "So, seeing as I *am* me, I will do just that. Right now."

LANGUID LIZARDS

At five o'clock the next morning, in the Junior Girls' Apprentice Dorm of the Wizard Tower, a small, highly irritable **Alarm** bug jumped off its perch and landed with a soft thump on Tod's pillow. The bug proceeded to emit a loud buzz while jumping up and down and flashing a bright blue light that lit up the tented curtains surrounding Tod's bed. Blearily, Tod opened her eyes and found herself staring into the unblinking pinpoint brilliance of the bug's single eye. She shot out a hand and trapped the bug beneath her fingers. As soon as it was safely enclosed, it switched off its light and lay in Tod's hand, pulsing just enough to let Tod know that it was still on duty. Tod yawned and sat up. She felt along the shelf at the back of her bed for the **Alarm** box, shoved the bug into it and snapped the lid closed.

Five minutes later, dressed in her green Apprentice tunic and leggings, Tod was heading out of the Junior Apprentice Dormitory along the corridor to the silver spiral stairs, which were turning slowly on nighttime mode.

They took her down through the gently shimmering ceiling showing the constellations of the night sky to the Great Hall below, which Tod was relieved to find was empty. She stepped off the spiral stairs and glanced down at the floor. *GOOD MORNING, APPRENTICE*, it said. *YOU'RE UP EARLY*. Tod always felt slightly unsettled by the floor, which made comments that seemed kind of nosy. She hurried over its soft, sandlike surface hoping that it wouldn't make any remarks later to Septimus about her being up so early—Tod was pretty sure that Septimus would not approve of her mission that morning. In fact, Tod was not sure that she herself approved. But she had been unable to resist Oskar's plea for help. And besides, she saw no harm in what they were about to do. No harm at all. She just didn't want anyone to know about it.

With these uneasy thoughts in her mind, Tod headed for the tall silver doors, the tops of which disappeared into the misty blue nighttime light of the Great Hall. Tod loved the predawn atmosphere of the Wizard Tower, its purposeful soft hum of sleeping **Magyk**, the lingering scent of the previous day's spells combined with the musty scent of dead-of-night forays into the **Darke** that Septimus occasionally allowed the Senior Apprentices.

Tod murmured the password and the doors swung slowly open. The crisp early-morning air blew in and swept the guilty feelings right out of her head. It was, she could tell, going to be another beautiful day. Stuffing her hands into the pockets of her thick wool jacket, Tod hurried down the wide, white marble steps and headed into the courtyard. She took the long way around the base of the Wizard Tower to look at progress on the Orm Pit. This was the place where the Ormlet would, if Septimus had his way, be taken this very afternoon, never to fly free in the summer sky again.

Tod stopped in front of a sheet of wood nailed over the Orm Pit entrance on which was painted *Keep Out*. Beside it was a pile of rubble, on top of which lay an upturned wheelbarrow, an empty milk bottle and a pair of boots. On the other side of the notice was a large stack of bricks and the locked shed that contained the builders' tools and, more important, their tea-making equipment. It did not look to her as though Oskar had anything to be concerned about. It seemed impossible that the Orm Pit was going to be finished any time soon. But Tod had promised to help Oskar, and help him she would.

Tod completed her circle of the broad base of the Wizard Tower and hurried across the courtyard to the Great Arch. When she reached the cool lapis interior of the arch she turned, as she always did, to look up at the Wizard Tower. It still gave her a strange mixture of awe and happiness. This morning the Wizard Tower looked particularly striking. The great buttresses that supported the building glowed deep silver as they reared up to the crowning golden pyramid. The shape of the tower reminded Tod of the ancient PathFinder drawings of ships that had flown to the stars, which she had once glimpsed in a secret drawer in her father's room. She wondered if that was why she loved the Wizard Tower so much—because it felt like shared history.

Tod gazed up at the pattern of tiny purple windows with shifting **Magykal** screens. A few lazy loops of blue and green **Magykal** lights—known as **Sprites**—came slowly dropping down; she felt the popping of **Magyk** on her upturned face and watched as a green **Sprite** landed at her feet. Mesmerized, she picked it up. She watched it slowly fade until there was nothing left but the warm prickly buzz of **Magyk** on her palm. Tod smiled. This morning she really felt the power of the Wizard Tower, a repository of so many thousands of years of **Magyk**. She thought of the huge block of lapis lazuli on which it stood, concentrating the **Magyk**, increasing it, driving it, and she shivered. Sometimes the place almost overwhelmed her. She shook herself out of her daze and hurried away—she mustn't be late for Oskar.

Tod strode purposefully out through the Great Arch and into the deserted wide avenue of Wizard Way, which stretched away in front of her. Lit by matching pairs of silver torch posts, Wizard Way was quietly beautiful in the morning twilight. As the tinny chimes of the Drapers Yard Clock drifted over the rooftops, Tod counted five and broke into a jog. She could already see a small figure leaning against the doorway of the Manuscriptorium.

“You're late,” hissed Oskar, stepping from the shadows. “I was about to go without you.”

“Sorry, Oskie,” Tod whispered. “It always takes longer to get out of the Wizard Tower than I expect.”

Oskar could never be cross with Tod for long. “It's okay. I'm glad you're here.”

They walked rapidly down the Way, hurrying from one pool of torchlight to the next. “So what’s this stuff you’ve got, Oskie?” Tod asked.

Oskar took a brown paper bag from his pocket and gave it to Tod. She stopped beneath a torch post, gingerly opened the bag and peered in. It was full of delicate blue balls like little sparkling sugar sweets. “They’re Languid Lizard **Charms**,” Oskar said proudly. “From the Wild Book Store.”

“The Wild Book Store?” Tod said. “I didn’t know you were allowed in there.”

Oskar looked shifty. “Er, well, it wasn’t me who went in, actually.”

Tod caught Oskar’s expression. “So who did?” she asked.

“Um,” said Oskar. “Well. It was Drammer Makken.”

Tod nearly dropped the bag. “*Drammer?*”

“He was very helpful,” Oskar said defensively. “He seemed to really care about the Ormlet.”

“*Seemed*,” Tod said scornfully.

“No, I think he did. He mentioned Ormie first, not me. And the Wild Book Store is a scary place. There were horrible growls when he went in, and a Pteragon tried to bite him. Drammer’s not so bad, you know.”

“You be careful of him, Oskie. I don’t trust him.”

“Oh, he’s over all that *Wiz* stuff,” Oskar said, referring to the sled race that Drammer had lost his chance to run. “He said seeing as you never finished anyway, it didn’t bother him.”

“Huh,” was Tod’s response.

“I know,” Oskar said sympathetically. “It bugs me that I didn’t finish either. But there’s always next year.”

Tod grinned. “Yeah, we’re going to win next year, Oskie.” She peered again into the little paper bag. “These are lovely. They feel kind of . . . calm. Gentle.”

“Yeah. They were in a book called *Draxx*.”

“Septimus has a *Draxx* too,” Tod said. “But there aren’t any **Charms** in it.”

“There weren’t any in ours either,” Oskar said, “until this one was discovered. Apparently one of the dinosaur books had eaten it ages ago. And then the dinosaur book died and fell apart and the *Draxx* dropped out—complete with **Charms**.”

“That is so weird,” Tod said.

Oskar smiled. “It is. That’s why I like it at the Manuscriptorium.”

Tod and Oskar walked companionably down Wizard Way, chatting about the Castle. They were both still new to the place and enjoyed swapping notes, but Oskar’s conversation always came back to the Ormlet. “I so hope this works,” he said. “I just want to get it right for Ormie.”

“Its name is *not* Ormie, Oskie,” Tod said.

“It’s Ormie to me, whatever anyone says. So there.”

At the end of Wizard Way, they crossed over to a tall fence of iron railings that enclosed some woods. Tod opened a gate and led the way into a dark footpath that ran through the narrow strip of woodland bordering the Palace gardens. The path was overhung by trees and had an uneasy atmosphere due to the fact that it was a regular haunt for members of the Wendron Witch coven, who were keeping watch on the Palace. Tod could feel remnants of the witchy presence and it made her nervous.

The path took them down to the riverbank and then along to the Palace Landing Stage where blazing torches lit the stone quay. They stopped and looked out at the mist hovering over the sluggish waters of the river and listened to the quiet peeping of the river birds searching the mud for worms.

“It’s going to be a beautiful day,” Oskar whispered. “You can tell by the mist. It’s already evaporating off the surface. And I so want Ormie to enjoy it. She’s not got long now before . . . well, *you know*.”

You know referred to the next stage of the Ormlet’s development: Stasis. According to *Orm Fancier’s Factoids*—a short version of which had recently been printed for the public and was generally referred to as the *OFF*—Stasis was a state of coma. It would occur toward the end of the first six months of the Ormlet’s life, which the *OFF* called the larval stage. Once in Stasis, a cocoon would form around the young Orm. About one hundred hours later the cocoon would explode, and a small, fragile, hollow tube with a ferocious cutting tool at one end would emerge and immediately burrow down into the earth. From that moment on, it would eat its way through rock, turning it to lapis lazuli. Why it did this, the *OFF* had no idea.

Tod and Oskar walked on toward a very tall hedge, dark and dense. Beyond this lay the Dragon Field, where the Ormlet resided with its Imprinted Orm-Mother, Septimus’s dragon, Spit Fyre. They opened the gate and followed the path to what was known as the Dragon Kennel—a long,

tall, stone building with a line of windows just below the roofline, set high enough for a dragon to look out of. Nervously they approached a ramp leading up to a set of battered double doors, secured with a broad iron bar. Above was a sign painted in green and outlined in gold: *Dragon Kennel*, beneath which *Orm Nursery* had been added. From within came the unmistakable sound of a sleeping dragon: long, slow breaths like the wind sighing in the treetops.

Tod and Oskar skirted the ramp and headed for a small door in the side of the Dragon Kennel. Oskar took off his rucksack. “I’ve got her a chicken,” he said. “She loves chicken.”

Tod was touched by Oskar’s devotion to the Ormlet, but she didn’t share it. The Ormlet’s very existence had nearly led to the loss of her home village and the death of her father. And now its presence in the Castle had caused a rift between two people of whom Tod was extremely fond: Septimus and the previous ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Marcia Overstrand. Septimus had been diplomatic about their differences, but Tod knew he and Marcia had fallen out over the consequences of putting the Ormlet beneath the Wizard Tower. After a particularly angry exchange with Septimus ten days ago, Marcia had walked out and had not been seen since—and the cause of all the strife and unhappiness was the snappy, spiteful little Ormlet that Oskar unaccountably loved. Tod’s thoughts were rudely interrupted by a cold roast chicken hurtling toward her. She caught it, protesting. “Oh, *yuck*, Oskie.”

“Hang on to it while I get the **Charms** out,” Oskar said. “I’m going to put them into the chicken like stuffing. Ormie’s going to *love* it.”

Tod held the chicken and felt the crackle of **Magyk** as Oskar poured a stream of sparkling blue balls into it. “That’s a lot of **Charms**,” she said. “Are you sure you need so many? Oops, that one missed.”

Tod picked up the tiny **Charm** and held it between her finger and thumb, feeling the buzz of **Magyk** zipping through her hand. “Can I keep it?” she asked.

Oskar peered into the chicken. It was almost overflowing with the **Charms**. He nodded. “I reckon we’ve got plenty here. Drammer says you need one for each pound of weight and there were fifty-five. Fifty-four is easily okay.”

Tod bit back a comment about Drammer saying whatever suited him and put the **Charm** into the pocket of her Apprentice belt.

“Time for Ormie’s breakfast,” Oskar said jauntily. “Do you suppose she’s awake yet?”

As if in answer a tremendous thud came from inside the Dragon Kennel.

“Well, someone is,” Tod said.

“All set?” Oskar said a little anxiously.

“Yep,” Tod replied. “In we go.”

THE DRAGON KENNEL

Tod switched her **FlashLight** to red—a color considered soothing for reptiles. Oskar pushed open the door and he and Tod slipped inside. The Dragon Kennel was dark, musty and full of dragon. Tod and Oskar stood knee-deep in straw, staring at the serrated shape of Spit Fyre’s back, a glowing black in the red light. Spit Fyre’s mouth watered; he adored roast chicken. He raised his head and his brilliant green eye ringed with a circle of red regarded the bringers of the feast. Spit Fyre took in the familiar forms of the two young humans who had been with him at the hatching of the Ormlet and had helped to save it from the clutches of a particularly nasty sorcerer. They were always welcome. Especially when they brought roast chicken.

“Hello, Spit Fyre,” Tod whispered.

Spit Fyre practiced a recently acquired skill—he winked.

“We’ve come to see Ormie,” Oskar added. “I’ve got a chicken for her.”

Spit Fyre suppressed a sigh. His baby must come first, even with chicken. Resigned, he laid his head back down on the straw and closed his eyes.

Tod peered into the gloom, looking for the Ormlet. Suddenly her **FlashLight** caught a glimpse of gold. She crept forward and saw the blue of the Ormlet curled up against the pale whiteness of Spit Fyre’s stomach. Wedged at a jauntily crooked angle upon its flat head was Jenna’s golden circlet. “Oskie,” she whispered. “It’s here.”

Oskar remembered Barney Pot's toes and felt suddenly nervous. The Ormlet had a tendency to snap. And when it snapped it did damage, for the Orm had a line of sharp, curved bone in its mouth like a solid row of teeth, which acted like a guillotine. Holding the roast chicken out in front of him like a shield, Oskar crept around the bulge of Spit Fyre's belly and, taking care to hold the chicken upright so that the Languid Lizard **Charms** stayed inside, he nervously waved the bird beneath the flared nostrils of the sleeping Ormlet. It opened one brilliant blue eye and looked at him. "Hello, Ormie," Oskar whispered.

The Ormlet had mixed feelings associated with Oskar Sarn. Oskar had been present at its hatching but so had a lot of humans, and one of them had pulled its tail off. The Ormlet was pretty sure that wasn't Oskar, but an Orm always knows where its tail is, and the Ormlet knew that Oskar had it. That did not please the Ormlet at all, despite the fact it had grown a perfect new tail. However, the Ormlet also knew that its Orm-Mother (Spit Fyre) had saved Oskar from a fatal fall, and it suspected that if it tried to eat Oskar, its mother would be angry. And the Ormlet did not want that.

Oskar looked into the clear blue eye of the Ormlet. He was aware that something was going on inside its flat little brain, but luckily he was unaware that he was treading a narrow line between friend and food.

It was the roast chicken that decided the Ormlet. Food did not bring more food. Therefore Oskar was friend. And so very delicately, the Ormlet took the chicken between its prehensile lips, threw it up into the air, opened its mouth so it gaped like a snake's, and the chicken—along with its cargo of fifty-four Languid Lizard **Charms**—disappeared into oblivion.

The Ormlet licked its lips and awaited chicken number two: Barney Pot always fed it three. The Ormlet had reached its counting-to-three milestone only a few days ago and it was enjoying its newfound skill. It opened its mouth for Oskar to pop the next chicken in.

Oskar gazed back at the Orm happily. It looked so sweet, he thought. Like a little baby bird.

Tod thought otherwise. In her opinion the Orm looked dangerously hungry. "Oskar," she hissed urgently, "*we need to get out of here.*"

"Okay," Oskar said. "I'll just get the circlet." He reached out to lift it from the Ormlet's head only for Tod to grab his arm—hard.

"Ouch," Oskar protested. "What are you doing?"

“Oskie, *don’t*. It’ll bite.”

“No, it won’t. It’s eaten all the **Charms** now.”

“Eaten them, yes, but not digested them.”

Oskar turned around. “It needs to *digest* them? Don’t they work at once? You know, like **Magyk**?”

“No, Oskie, they don’t,” Tod said. “Edible **Charms** have to be digested. Didn’t Drammer tell you that?”

“No,” Oskar replied grumpily. “He didn’t mention that. At all.” He broke off as something wet and rasping touched his hand. “Oh look, Ormie’s trying to lick me . . . Oh! Hey! *Get off!*”

The Ormlet had grown tired of waiting for chicken number two and had decided to eat Oskar’s hand, which smelled quite chickeny. Oskar managed to snatch his hand away but the Ormlet snapped at his sleeve, pulling Oskar toward it, then it put a clawed foot on Oskar’s stomach and began to shake Oskar’s arm violently.

“Tod!” Oskar cried in dismay.

Tod seized Oskar’s jacket and pulled him back. In reply, the Ormlet tugged him forward. Spit Fyre, used to the Ormlet’s wriggings, paid no attention. The Ormlet had come to the conclusion that Oskar was food—he was the chicken-number-two substitute and the other human was the chicken-number-three substitute. The Ormlet licked its lips, opened its mouth, and a spurt of saliva shot into the air.

Oskar, who had read everything possible about Orms, knew exactly what that meant. “Help!” he yelled. “*Help!*”

In one deft movement, Tod spun Oskar around, pulling him out of his jacket, and propelled him toward the side door. As a disappointed Ormlet munched on the jacket and the packet of FrootLumps left in the pocket, Tod pushed Oskar out into the fresh air and slammed the door behind them.

“Thanks, Tod,” Oskar said, pale and trembling.

“I don’t know what you see in that creature,” Tod said. “It would be much better for everyone if it was locked up safely beneath the Wizard Tower.”

But Oskar loved the Ormlet no matter what. “Better for everyone,” he said, “except Ormie.”



PART IV

A LETTER

Tod slipped back into the Wizard Tower and was relieved to see that no one was around. She went off to the canteen to find some breakfast.

Some twenty floors above, Septimus Heap was sitting at his writing desk in his study. Septimus was not a great letter writer, but there was one letter he could put off no longer. He selected his favorite pen—one that Marcia had given him on his induction as ExtraOrdinary Wizard—and, with a twinge of regret about his last irritable words to the giver of the pen, he began the final copy of many attempts. It read:

The Wizard Tower

The Castle

From the desk of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Septimus Heap

By the hand of Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula

Dear Princess Driffa,

I hope you are well.

I had hoped to be able to bring you your precious Orm Egg as I promised to do, but unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond my control, the Egg has hatched. However, all is not lost. We managed to get to the Egg for the very moment of hatching and my dragon, Spit Fyre, Imprinted it. We now have the baby Orm residing at the Castle, and I hope soon to place it beneath the Wizard Tower for the benefit of us all.

I sincerely hope that in the fullness of time, this Orm will lay another Egg, which I will be able to bring you and once more your beautiful Chamber of the Great Orm will be complete.

Septimus paused and reread the letter. It seemed rather stilted, but he was unused to writing to princesses, especially attractive yet haughty ones. He sat for some minutes staring out of the window, and then picked up his pen and added:

I wonder if you would like to visit the former occupant of your Egg? It is healthy and growing fast and I am sure would prove interesting for you to see. I would be happy to escort you through the Ways to our Wizard Tower, where we do have some very pleasant guest accommodations.

Septimus broke off and thought of the ratty little guest room at the end of the Apprentice corridor. That would not do for a princess. He must do something about that at once. He picked up the pen again.

You would be most welcome. Please send your reply by the hand of the deliverer of this letter, and I will meet you at your convenience.

*With very best wishes,
Septimus Heap, EOW*

Septimus reread the letter and sighed. It wasn't witty, it wasn't amusing and it didn't even sound like he had written it, but it was the best he could do. He folded it into three, sealed it with the ExtraOrdinary Wizard Seal and took it down to the Great Hall.

A bowl of oatmeal in one hand and a mug of hot cinnamon milk in the other, Tod was heading across the canteen toward Rose, who was sitting at a corner table near a noisy group of Senior Apprentices, members of the notorious Knights of Knee gang.

Rose tucked her long brown plait over her shoulder and smiled up at Tod. "Hey, Tod," she said. "Come and join me."

"Hey." Tod faltered, aware of being stared at.

"Hay?" one of the Knights of Knee mimicked in a high voice.

"Neigh . . . neigh . . ." another whinnied, to the great amusement of the rest of the gang.

Rose wheeled around and eyeballed them. "Stop that right now," she said.

One of the gang snorted like a horse.

"Newt Makken," Rose said. "I *Name* you."

Tod felt very awkward. If a Wizard Named an Apprentice they had to make themselves available for cleanup duties in the evening—and that evening Tod knew there was a party at the old Infirmary. She guessed the Knights of Knee had been planning to go.

“Oh, come *on*,” Newt protested. “What did I do?”

“You know what you did,” Rose said. “You were intimidating someone younger than yourself.”

“That is *not* fair,” Newt whined.

“Most definitely *unfair* . . . *unfairly* unfair, in fact,” his friends joined in.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Rose said. Tod saw a triumphant smirk pass between Newt and his friends—until Rose proceeded to Name the rest of the gang sitting at the table. “There,” Rose said, “now that is perfectly fair.”

Aware of the angry silence from the neighboring table, Tod ate her oatmeal with little pleasure. She gulped down her drink and then she and Rose got up and left, Tod uncomfortably aware of the gimlet stares from the Knights of Knee following them. Outside the canteen she said, “Rose, can I ask you something, please?”

Rose smiled. “Of course you can. What do you want to know?”

“It’s about some **Charms**. From *Draxx*.”

Rose looked puzzled. “But there aren’t any **Charms** in *Draxx*.”

“There were some in the Manuscriptorium’s copy,” Tod said, hoping that she wasn’t giving away Oskar’s secret.

Rose frowned. “Are you sure? It’s not on our shared inventory.”

“I think they just found them,” Tod said.

“The Manuscriptorium should have told me,” Rose said. “We are meant to share our **Charm** inventories. I shall be having a word with their Chief about this.”

“Oh, but I’m sure they *will* tell you,” Tod said, feeling bad.

“Hmm.” Rose seemed unconvinced. “So, what did you want to know about these **Charms**? They’re old reptile ones, I imagine?”

“I’ve got one . . . look . . .” Tod began to open the pocket in her Apprentice belt but Rose stopped her.

“Not here.” Rose glanced back to see the Knights of Knee wandering gloomily out of the canteen. “Why don’t you come up to the **Charm** Chamber? It’s more private.”

Halfway up the spiral stairs the priority signal—an insistent beep—sounded. This alert was for a change in direction—the ExtraOrdinary Wizard was on his way down. Tod and Rose stepped off and waited. A few minutes later they saw the distinctive purple hem of robes of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Rose looked awkward, Tod thought, as Septimus revolved down toward them. He caught sight of his Apprentice and smiled. “Good Morning, Tod,” he said, his voice changing as the stairs took him around, and then as he revolved back, a more strained “Hello, Rose.”

“Hello, Septimus,” Rose replied.

“Sorry to override the stairs,” Septimus said. “I was happy to wait, but you know the stairs have a mind of their own.”

“That’s okay,” Rose said.

“Oh . . . good,” Septimus said. “I’m just, um, posting a letter.”

“Fine,” Rose said.

Septimus glanced down a little guiltily at the letter he was carrying. “Tod, I was hoping you might be free, actually.”

“Oh!” Tod said.

Septimus had now traveled past them and was disappearing down to the floor below. Rose gave Tod a little push. “You should go,” she said. “The ExtraOrdinary Wizard takes priority.”

“Not always, Rose,” Septimus’s voice drifted up toward them. “As you well know.”

Rose sighed. She gave Tod a rueful smile and said, “Come and see me when you can. I’m in the **Charm** Chamber all day.”

And so Tod found herself heading back down to the Great Hall, with an uncomfortable feeling that there was more to the Languid Lizard **Charms** than Oskar realized. And a good deal more to Rose and Septimus, too.

GRULA GAMES

Septimus was waiting at the foot of the stairs. “I’d like you to help Lucy Heap today,” he told Tod. “It’s a tight schedule to get the Orm Pit ready for this afternoon and Lucy needs a runner.”

Tod did not look enthusiastic and Septimus mistook her expression.

“Tod,” he said, “you must not pay too much attention to what Marcia says about the risks of having the Ormlet here. She worries too much. And I believe she is, on this occasion, wrong.”

“But the Ormlet might not have to come here yet. It might give the circlet back,” Tod said.

“And pigs might fly,” Septimus said, laughing. “And loop the loop with the Ormlet.”

Tod resigned herself to a day of being bossed around by Lucy Heap. “But can I see the Grula first? *Please?*” she asked. Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula was a skilled **ShapeShifter**. He had a fine repertoire of guises and enjoyed playing to his audience. Most mornings the Grula-Grula appeared in a different **Shape**, and Tod loved to see him.

Septimus smiled. “All right, stay and see what Ben’s doing today. But after that it’s straight off to Lucy.”

On the other side of the hall was a newly painted, shiny orange door. This had until recently been the entrance to the Stranger Chamber—a holding pen for undesirables who had found their way into the Wizard Tower. It now sported a large brass knocker and a sign declaring it to be: *The Residence of Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula*. Suddenly three Senior Apprentices—Newt and two friends—came hurtling toward it. Newt slammed the doorknocker and another yelled through the keyhole, “Wakey wakey, Fuzzball!” then fell laughing against the door.

Septimus was across the Great Hall like a missile. “*What,*” he demanded, “do you think you are doing?”

Tod was pleased to see Newt go white with shock. “Ner-nothing,” he stammered. “I . . . er . . .”

“I will not have this kind of—” The orange door began to open; Septimus stopped midsentence and turned as pale as Newt. Newt shrieked and fell into a faint. His two accomplices turned and ran. Someone behind Tod screamed. Septimus swore. Tod put her hands over her face.

Dripping with slime, a ten-foot-tall, matte black human skeleton with a tusked head of a beast stood in the doorway, surveying those trembling before it. Tod peered through her fingers with a mixture of horror and fascination. It looked terrifying, but oddly it didn’t feel **Darke**. Tod lowered her hands and looked at Septimus, wondering what he was going to do.

Like Tod, Septimus could feel no **Darkeness** in the manifestation of what he knew to be a Kraan: something extremely dangerous for Wizards, particularly young ones. Despite being almost certain that the Kraan was actually Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula performing an angry **ShapeShift**, Septimus had learned not to take things at face value. The Wizard Tower was a strange place, and it was not unknown for truly **Darke** beings to manifest themselves within its walls. Somewhat anxiously, Septimus recalled the subject of another of his disagreements with Marcia—the **Darke Magyk** tutorials for final year Apprentices that he held on floor eighteen. The thought crossed his mind that maybe Marcia was right about the perils of “inviting the **Darke**,” as she put it. But whether this was real or not, Septimus knew he must show no weakness. If this was a real Kraan, it would be fatal. And if it wasn’t, which he sincerely hoped was the case, it would do his reputation no good. Taking care not to be within arm’s length of the beast—he knew that one touch of a Kraan would kill—Septimus stepped forward and looked up at its face. He breathed a sigh of relief. Not only did the creature have merely two eyes—rather than the standard Kraan complement of six—but they were undoubtedly Grula-Grula pink rather than Kraan red.

“Benhira-Benhara, I request that you **Shift** your **Shape** immediately,” Septimus said, trying to keep the annoyance from his voice. He did not succeed and the Grula-Grula became distressed. Its **Shape** began to drip copious amounts of black slime, to which the floor responded with the words, *FOUL! FOUL! FOUL!* spreading out from the slime like shrieks of disgust and encircling Septimus’s feet. The floor then added: *GET IT OUT OF HERE, EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD. THE SLIME IS SOAKING INTO MY BITS.*

Septimus took a deep breath and said in the most pleasant tone he could muster, “Dear Benhira-Benhara, I pray you become your beautiful Grula self once more.”

This was more acceptable. A tint of orange began to creep across the darkness of the Kraan skeleton and its outlines became fuzzy. Within thirty seconds the comforting sight of a ten-foot-tall triangle of orange fur stood in its place. From within the fur two little arms emerged; they reached up to the Grula-Grula’s head and two slender hands parted the fur to reveal a

shiny, pink, flat face. The little mouth smiled at Septimus. “Good morning, ExtraOrdinary Wizard,” came a surprisingly high-pitched voice.

“Good morning, Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula,” Septimus replied, a little snappily. “I would be grateful if you would keep the **Darke ShapeShifts** for outside this place. Perhaps for Hallowseeth in the Port. But not here, please.”

“I apologize.” The Grula-Grula sounded crestfallen. “I was alarmed by the assault upon my door. It is our default **Shape**, you know. When we are distressed.”

“I understand,” Septimus said. “And I in turn apologize for the rude behavior of our Apprentices. I am so sorry you have been distressed by their actions.”

The Grula-Grula bowed. “And I am desolated to have distressed *you*, ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Pray, how may I make amends?”

Septimus fished the precious letter out of his pocket. “Well, seeing as you have asked, Benhira-Benhara, I would be most grateful if you would take a letter to the Eastern SnowPlains for me.”

Tod—who was enjoying watching Newt Makken’s friends unceremoniously dragging him away by his feet—suddenly paid attention. Why was Septimus sending a letter to the Eastern SnowPlains? She soon found out.

“It is for Princess Driffa,” Septimus said. “Would you be able to deliver it to the Snow Palace? I realize that is a little out of your way.”

The Grula-Grula was anxious to get back into Septimus’s good books. He loved being at the Wizard Tower. After years of drifting around the Ancient Ways, trying to find somewhere he belonged, he had—after a false start in a shop selling cloaks—found in the Castle a place where people liked him and sought his company. The Grula-Grula loved being invited to parties and asked out to lunch; he basked in the smiles and friendly greetings that came his way when he sat in the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower and watched the world go by. He had at last found a home, and he dreaded being asked to leave. And so he said, “It will be my pleasure to deliver this personally to Snow Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful.”

Dismayed, Septimus looked down at the plain *Princess Driffa* that he had written on the front of the sealed letter. He had totally forgotten about

Driffa's numerous honorifics—and her insistence upon their use. But there was no way he could face rewriting the letter. It would have to go as it was. Septimus placed the letter on the Grula-Grula's delicate pink upturned palm with a heavy heart. He no longer expected a reply.

The Grula-Grula stuffed the letter deep into his fur and then he turned to Tod and bowed. "Miss Alice," he said. "Greetings, PathFinder."

Tod smiled. The Grula-Grula was—apart from her guardian, Dr. Dandra Draa—the only person who called her Alice without annoying her. "Good morning, Benhira-Benhara," she replied, and bowed in return.

"Miss Alice, I would be most honored if you would accompany me upon my journey," Benhira-Benhara said. "It is always a delight to travel the Ways with a PathFinder."

But Tod's hopes of avoiding a day as Lucy Heap's runner were soon dashed.

"Benhira-Benhara, I thank you," Septimus quickly replied. "You honor my Apprentice with your generous offer, but I regret that I must decline on her behalf. She has essential **Magykal** work to do today and I cannot possibly spare her. Perhaps another time?"

The Grula-Grula bowed. "Indeed, ExtraOrdinary, another time. I shall look forward to it immensely. But I trust you will spare Miss Alice to accompany me to the arch and wish me well?"

"With pleasure, Benhira-Benhara," Septimus replied. As Tod and the Grula-Grula walked out of the Wizard Tower, Septimus called out, "Homework tonight, Tod—read up about Kraan."

"Kraan?" asked Tod.

Septimus smiled. "You'll see why," he said, and then added, "Have a nice day."

Tod thought that was unlikely. Together she and the Grula-Grula went down the wide white marble steps. They made a strange couple, a ten-foot-tall triangle of orange fur accompanying a small human in green, half its size. At the foot of the steps, they took a sharp left turn and walked back to the base of the Wizard Tower. Here, where most people would have a cupboard under the stairs, the Wizard Tower had a **Hidden** arch—its very own entrance to the Ancient Ways. This one connected directly with the Keep, where Marcia Overstrand, ex-ExtraOrdinary Wizard, now lived. Unlike most people, both Tod and the Grula-Grula could see within the

white marble the shadowy shape of the arch, with the number *VII* inscribed upon its keystone. The Grula-Grula stretched out his arm, and at the touch of his little pink palm the arch began to glow. Tod looked at it wistfully. With the choke of dust in the air and the sound of hammering from behind the Tower, she imagined traveling the Ways home and spending the day out at sea, fishing with her father. The thought was almost too much to bear, but Tod told herself sternly that she was an Apprentice now, and her job was to be at the Wizard Tower and learn **Magyk**. Besides, soon enough she would be going home for her birthday and the MidSummer Circle.

The Grula-Grula gave a farewell bow. Tod returned it and stepped back. She watched the triangle of orange fur step into the arch and move smoothly toward an enticing white mist. With a sense of awe Tod saw the Grula-Grula blend into the mist, and then he was gone. The glow faded from the arch beneath the steps, and it resumed its shadowy form.

Tod walked slowly around to the back of the Wizard Tower, where she was greeted by Lucy Heap with a clipboard directing operations. “Ah, Tod!” Lucy said. “You’re just in time. We need essential supplies.” She handed Tod a list:

- 10 packets of Squashed Fly biscuits
- 10 Nut Bomb bars
- 2 boxes of tea
- 1 bottle of milk
- 4 bags of sugar

“Thanks, Tod,” Lucy said. “That should keep them going for the morning. And when you come back you can help with mixing the mortar.”

Great, thought Tod gloomily, as she went out through the back gate and headed off to the Castle General Stores. *Mixing mortar. Just great.*

SERPENT’S SNOOK

Kicking a pebble as she went, Tod walked slowly along Serpent’s Snook, the winding alley that led to the Castle Stores. The alley did not raise her spirits. It was dark and smelled of cat pee. Thoughts of the sun, boats and

fresh sea breezes began to torment Tod yet again, and she was very nearly tempted to turn around, run through Arch VII and go home. If she hadn't found a small, green ball made of scuffed leather bouncing along the alley in an oddly purposeful manner, she might well have done so.

It was the sound that Tod had first noticed: a gentle *bing-bing-bing*, as the sound of its bounces echoed off the alleyway's high brick walls. Tod fell into step beside the ball, fascinated by its slow but determined onward motion. She put her hand out to touch the ball as it came up from a bounce, and a twinge of **Darke Magyk** sent a tingle through her fingers. She dropped back a little, but was not deterred. She had never found anything obviously **Magykal** outside the Wizard Tower—and she had never seen anything like the green ball inside the Wizard Tower either. This was something special.

Some five minutes later the ball and Tod rounded the last bend of Serpent's Snook. The alley opened out into Snook's Nook, a square bounded by small workshops on three sides and on the fourth the high walls of the most populated area of the Castle: the Ramblings. Set into the base of the walls was a line of five vaulted caverns from which the Castle Stores traded. Above the vaults, the walls of the Ramblings rose up, dotted with myriad windows, balconies and lines of washing stuck precariously out on sticks. Tod had spent a whole day on a tour of the Ramblings and had only seen a small part of it. It was a massive warren of a place, full of winding corridors, tiny courtyards, wells, shops, theaters, a hospital, workshops and schools. Thousands of people lived there in a variety of rooms, apartments and rooftop houses—and most of them did their grocery shopping at the Castle Stores.

As the ball bounced merrily into Snook's Nook, Tod considered what to do. She could keep following the ball, or she could get Lucy's shopping. Lucy's shopping lost: it did not stand a chance against the mystery of the little green ball. Tod focused all her attention on the ball. It had now sped up and was moving in short, quick bounces so she had to break into a trot to keep up. It bounced rapidly across the front of the Castle Stores, past the store backboard, the vegetable display, the bread stall, and then with a dramatic spin to the left it headed into the stores. Tod was after it in seconds, but she was too late. The ball was nowhere to be seen.

It was dark inside and busy with shoppers. Tod pushed her way through, keeping her eyes to the ground, determined to catch up with what she now thought of as *her* ball. It was so easy to lose a ball in a shop, she thought. It could have bounced into someone's bag, it could be hiding in a dark and dusty corner—there were plenty of those to choose from—or maybe, Tod thought as she checked out a display of limes, it might just be resting somewhere it would not be noticed. She was on the verge of giving up the search and actually getting Lucy's shopping when a piercing scream rang out and she heard a familiar voice yell, "Argh! Get it off! *Get it off me!*"

Tod pushed her way through the shoppers and headed toward the back of the store where the yells were coming from. There she found exactly whom she had expected—Marissa. But she also found something she had not expected—the little green ball.

The ball was bouncing on the spot beside Marissa, seeming to Tod to be excited to have found a long-lost friend. Marissa clearly did not feel the same way. Shrieking, "Get off me! Get *off!*" she was flailing her arms, trying to bat the ball away, but with no success. Nimbly avoiding every swipe and yet bouncing in tight enough circles to prevent Marissa from moving, the ball reminded Tod of a sheepdog she had recently watched in the Farmlands, corralling a lost sheep and keeping it penned in until the farmer came to collect it.

Tod began to hear muttering from nearby customers—"Witch" . . . "Witch" . . . "Witch"—and people began to move away. Soon Marissa was alone in an empty space—apart from Tod, the ball and a bundle of candles that Marissa had dropped, which were now rolling across the floor.

A large woman wearing a brown shopkeeper's coat and a grubby apron pushed her way through the onlookers. She stood, arms folded and angry, taking in the scene: her precious candles scattered across the floor, a known witch causing trouble, along with the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice—who should know better—messing around with a ball. Picking the smaller of the problem customers, she stormed up to Tod and said, "No ball games are allowed inside the stores. Take your ball and leave, Apprentice."

"But it's not my ball," Tod protested.

"Oh, 'it's not my ball,' 'it's not my fault,' 'it's not my dog's poop,'—I've heard it all before," the shopkeeper snapped. And then, to Tod's amazement, she stuck out her brawny arm, and in a catch worthy of the star

of the Castle catch team, the shopkeeper plucked the ball out of the air. Her broad fingers closed around it and within her grasp the ball lay still and content at last. It had **Tracked** its quarry and now it had been caught: all was well. All was complete.

“Apprentice, do you want your ball or not?” the shopkeeper demanded.

“Oh! Well, yes. Yes, please. I do want it,” Tod stammered.

“And what’s the magic word?” the shopkeeper demanded.

Tod tried to think of a **Magykal** word to do with shops that the woman might want to know, but her mind was blank. “Um . . .” she said. “I . . .” And then Tod realized. “Please,” she said. “Please could I have the ball?”

The shopkeeper handed it over. Tod took the ball, which felt surprisingly hot, and held it tightly, afraid that it might decide to jump out of her grip. “Thank you,” she said, smiling broadly. “Thank you very much.”

“That’s all right,” the shopkeeper replied, mollified. “You run along now and I’ll get rid of the nasty witch who took your ball.” But there was no witch to get rid of. Marissa had gone, and so had three bundles of candles from a nearby display.

Tod dutifully bought Lucy’s shopping and lugged it all the way back to the building site. The ball sat quietly at the bottom of the Castle Stores bag, weighed down by packets of biscuits and sugar. Tod smiled as she walked. Finding the little green ball had transformed her day. She no longer minded how many cups of tea she had to make or how much mortar she had to mix. She didn’t know what the ball was or where it had come from, but she didn’t care. Despite its little twinge of **Darke**, it already felt like a friend.

AN ORMNAP

The sun was setting when at last the Orm Pit was finished. All that could be seen of weeks of laborious tunneling down through the lapis lazuli was a neat iron grille covering a circular hole at the foot of the Wizard Tower. There had been no need for it to be circular, Septimus had pointed out, as the mature Orm would never come up through it. But Lucy had been adamant; a structure must respect those who lived within, she had told

Septimus sternly. Also, Lucy had said, the empty circle would act as a reminder of what the mature Orm would be doing deep beneath the ground. This had given Septimus an uneasy feeling.

But now all was done. While Tod swept up the last of the blue dust, Lucy Heap paid the builders. Then she thanked Tod for her help and wearily went home to her Simon, hoping that she might find him a little better. But she did not.

Half an hour later, darkness was falling and Tod and Septimus were walking down Wizard Way, heading for the Dragon Kennel and the nervously awaited Orm test. Tod at last got a chance to show the little green ball to Septimus.

“It’s a **Tracker** ball,” he said, throwing it from one hand to another. “It’s not nearly as **Darke** as most of them, I am pleased to say. And it is **UnNamed** too. Where did you get it from?”

Tod told Septimus about her meeting with Marissa in the Castle Stores.

“The ball stayed with her, you say?”

“Yes,” said Tod. “It kept bouncing up and down, like it was keeping her in one place.”

“It sounds like a simple **Track**,” Septimus said. “Leading its Master—or Mistress—to its quarry. But there was no one following it?”

Tod shook her head. “No. We were there for at least five minutes and no one turned up. Then the shopkeeper took the ball and Marissa ran away.”

“So, did it touch Marissa?”

“Yes, it kept bouncing up at her and hitting her. She kept batting it away, but it wouldn’t stop.”

“Until it was caught. It sounds to me like the shopkeeper unwittingly ended the **Track**,” Septimus said.

“So, if I let it go now, would it still go after Marissa?” Tod asked.

“Only if you **Re-Instruct** it.”

“*Me?*”

Septimus smiled. “Well, it looks like it belongs to you now. Finders keepers—isn’t that what they say about **Tracker** balls?”

“Is it?”

They had reached the entrance to the Palace gardens when Septimus said, “We’ve not had any **Tracker** balls in the Wizard Tower—apart from

one Marcia confiscated from my brother Simon.”

“Lucy’s Simon?” Tod asked.

“The very same,” Septimus said. “Simon has a bit of a **Darke** history, believe it or not. The thing with **Tracker** balls is that they are often used without consent of the person who is being **Tracked**. They are covert **Magyk**, and that’s an area that tends toward the **Darke**.”

“Does that mean I can’t keep it in the Wizard Tower?” Tod asked anxiously.

“Not at all,” Septimus said. “We must not be afraid of the **Darke**. I believe we should learn to understand it. I’ll give you a **Safe** to keep it in just in case, though.”

They walked down to the riverbank and across the Palace Landing stage, which was lit with torches sending flames high into the still night air, and headed for the tall dense hedge that separated the Dragon Field from the Palace gardens. Septimus pushed open the gate and walked in. He stopped so suddenly that Tod trod on his cloak.

“Oh . . . rats!” Septimus exclaimed.

Tod squeezed past Septimus to see what was wrong. She gasped: something had exploded inside the Dragon Kennel. The roof was gone, and what was left of it was lying strewn across the grass. Oskar and Ferdie were hurtling toward them, and behind them came Barney Pot, running somewhat awkwardly.

“Ormie . . .” Oskar gasped as he reached them. “Ormie’s *gone!*”

Barney reached them, breathless. “They took the Ormlet . . .” He puffed. “Put it in a sack . . . massive bang . . . roof went flying . . . so did Mr. Spit Fyre.”

“Who took the Ormlet?” Septimus asked.

“Witches,” Barney said. “They always come at twilight, don’t they?” He looked over both shoulders and then spat upon the ground—the old way of keeping away harm when a witch’s name is said. “It was Bryony and Madron. I know them.”

Tod knew them too. Bryony and Madron were the Wendron Witch Mother’s assistants. Only a few months ago they had tried to throw Oskar and Ferdie onto a fire.

“Witches!” Septimus was shocked.

“Yes,” said Barney. “I saw them running out of the field with a sack. And I knew at once what they had in there. You can’t mistake a bright blue tail sticking out of a sack. I tried to catch up with them but, well, what with my toes—or rather, *not* with my toes—I’m not very fast at the moment. So before I can do anything, they take off in a boat with some kind of **Enchanted thing** pushing it.” Barney Pot shook his head. “I dunno. I never seen anything like *that*.”

“Like what?” Septimus asked.

“Some kind of creature stuck to the back of the boat. It made a nasty noise and was pushing the boat along faster than you would have thought possible. They were gone in a flash. Down the river, around Raven’s Rock and that was it.”

Septimus shook his head. “I don’t understand,” he said. “Why didn’t Spit Fyre stop them?”

“It was awful,” Barney said. “He was flat out on the straw. Head lolling, eyes wide-open. Couldn’t get a spark out of him . . .” Barney’s voice broke and he paused to collect himself. “I thought he was dead. But it was some kind of witchy **Enchantment**. It lasted just long enough for them to get away. He woke up all of a sudden, sent me flying with his tail, and then that was it. Smashed his head through the roof like a fist through rice paper. Then his wings went up and he was gone, up like a star rocket.” Barney pointed up to the sky.

“That’s my dragon,” Septimus said proudly. “But how witches got the Ormlet into a sack I cannot imagine.”

Barney looked embarrassed. “Well, ExtraOrdinary, the thing is, the Ormlet’s been very quiet today. To be honest, I was glad of the break after all the trouble yesterday, but this afternoon I began to get a bit concerned, like. So I looked in and it was fast asleep and Mr. Spit Fyre was licking it. He was being quite rough with it, like he was trying to wake it up. Didn’t seem right somehow.” Barney Pot shook his head.

Tod, Oskar and Ferdie exchanged guilty glances. Tod wondered if she should tell Septimus about their morning expedition, but it felt like tattling on Oskar.

Barney was still in full flow. “What I think is that those witches came in the morning twilight and fed the Ormlet something dodgy. It wouldn’t be difficult; it eats anything.” Barney sighed. “As I know all too well.”

“So why didn’t they take it this morning?” Septimus wondered.

Barney had worked it out. “Well, you see, they couldn’t do an **Enchantment**; it wouldn’t last long enough. No one would want to be stuck with an Ormlet in a boat and find it was suddenly wide awake. So they fed it something in the morning twilight and came back for it in the evening twilight.” Barney shook his head. “It was strong stuff they gave it, that’s for sure.”

Oskar gave a loud sigh of despair.

“I’m so sorry, Oskar,” Septimus said kindly. “I know how much you loved the Ormlet.”

“It’s all my fault, I—” Oskar began, but Septimus stopped him.

“Of course it isn’t your fault,” he said briskly. “In fact, it isn’t *anyone’s* fault the Ormlet’s fallen asleep. Not even the witches.”

“How do you make that out, then?” asked Barney, puzzled.

“Barney,” Septimus said, “you remember how I said that you only had to put up with the Ormlet until it went into Stasis?”

“Yes, I do,” Barney said. “And I can’t say I wasn’t looking forward to it going off to Stasis. And hoping it wasn’t too near here if I’m honest.”

Septimus looked puzzled, but he carried on. “Well, I believe that has happened a little early, that’s all.”

Barney looked even more puzzled than Septimus. “Right . . .” he said. “So why, if you don’t mind me asking, did you get those witches to take it? I would have happily taken it there for you.” Barney sounded hurt.

“Taken it where?” asked Septimus.

“To the Stasis place. Wherever it is.”

At last Septimus understood. “Stasis isn’t a place, Barney. It’s a state of being. It’s what happens to the Ormlet when it is about to change into an adult. It spends a few days in Stasis, then it forms a cocoon and then it explodes.”

Barney looked shocked. “*Explodes?*”

“Apparently,” Septimus said.

“Well, you might have told me,” Barney said huffily. “If I’m being asked to look after a reptile that’s going to explode, I think it is only fair and reasonable to be told.”

Septimus felt he was losing grip of the situation. An apology seemed the quickest way out of it. “I’m really sorry, Barney. I should have told you. I

see that now.”

Barney was mollified, but not much.

“We have to get the Ormlet back quickly,” Septimus said. “It will be spinning its cocoon *right now*. Barney, did you see which direction Spit Fyre went?”

Barney pointed downriver. “Forest,” he replied a little curtly.

“The Forest,” Septimus muttered. “Of course. Where else would the witches go? We’ll get straight back to the Wizard Tower. I hope we can see Spit Fyre from the **LookOut**. Then I’m going out to find him and get our Orm back. I will *not* have those witches messing us about any more.”

“Couldn’t my **Tracker** ball find the Ormlet?” Tod asked.

“In theory, yes, but in practice, no. You would need something belonging to the Ormlet to wrap it in it for . . . hmm, I think it’s thirteen minutes.” Septimus turned to Barney. “Do you have anything belonging to the Ormlet? Or anything it touched?”

“Nothing,” Barney said grumpily. “It was a greedy little reptile. It ate most of the stuff it touched.”

Suddenly Oskar spoke. “I do! I’ve got its tail!” Thrilled to be able to do something truly helpful at last, Oskar could hardly contain his excitement. “I’ll bring it to the Wizard Tower, shall I?” Then, turning to Ferdie, he said, “Hey, Ferd, come and help me. It’s really heavy.”

Back at the Wizard Tower, Septimus went straight up to the **LookOut**, leaving Tod sitting outside on the steps to wait for her friends. A few minutes later Tod saw Oskar and Ferdie struggling through the Great Arch carrying a long parcel wrapped in brown paper. She ran to meet them and helped carry the surprisingly heavy tail.

“I put the wrong stuffing in,” Oskar said, breathless. “Which is why it weighs a ton.”

They plonked the tail down on the visitors’ bench. By the time Oskar had unwrapped it, Septimus was back from the **LookOut**. “Spit Fyre’s hovering over the Forest,” he said. “About three miles away over one of the densest parts. We’re going to need this **Tracker** ball, so let’s get it working.” He turned to Tod. “First, you’ll need to give it a name so that when it **Tracks** it will allow you to follow it, and also so that it will come when you call.”

“You could call it something nice, like Ormie-Finder,” Oskar suggested.

“Don’t be daft, Oskie,” Tod said. She remembered the sound that had made her first notice the ball. “I’ll call it Bing.”

“Bing!” Oskar scoffed. “And you call *me* daft.”

“Bing it is,” Septimus said. He handed her a piece of paper. “This is the **Naming Incantation**. Take the ball in both hands and say this. Here, I’ll hold the paper for you.”

And so by the Grula-Grula’s orange door, to the great interest of a few passing Wizards, Tod read the words:

Finders: keepers, Losers: weepers.

Tracker ball: never sleepers,

Tracker ball: softly creepers,

Tracker ball, I Name you “Bing!”

They curled the tail around Bing and Oskar tied it with the string from the parcel to make sure it stayed put. Then they sat beside Bing and the tail and watched the second hand on the huge clock above the doors sweep slowly around thirteen times. It seemed to take forever.

As the hand began its fourteenth sweep, Septimus stood up. “Good, you can unwrap it now, Tod.” He turned to Oskar and Ferdie. “I assume it is no use me trying to stop you coming on the Ormlet **Track**?”

Oskar and Ferdie shook their heads.

“I thought not. Now, as you three know all too well, the Forest is a dangerous place. We will need some protection. Tod, would you go and fetch my brothers Edd and Erik, please?”

Tod hurried away, keeping a tight hold on Bing. She could feel the ball buzzing with excitement, almost as much as she was at the prospect of her very first **Track**.



PART V

WOLVERINE WAYS

Tod found Edd and Erik Heap a little intimidating. A certain feral self-sufficiency—a hangover from the years they had spent as teens living in the Forest and adopting the Forest ways—was always with them. And so it was with a feeling of nervousness that she knocked on the door of their shared rooms on the third floor of the Wizard Tower. After some time, just as Tod was wondering whether it would be rude to knock again, the door was flung open. It was all she could do not to scream. Confronting her was a large wolverine standing on two legs, its eyes flashing a bright yellow.

“Oh!” said the wolverine, sounding surprised. “We thought you were Foxy. What do you want, Tod?”

“Um . . . I’m sorry. It’s really important.”

Another wolverine joined the first. “What is it?” it growled.

“Dunno,” said the first.

Tod took a deep breath and said, “I have a message from Septimus. He needs you to come to the Forest with him. It’s urgent. I’m sorry to interrupt the party stuff.”

The wolverines looked at each other, and then one of them wrenched off its head to reveal Edd Heap. Edd had long straw-colored hair like Septimus’s and his eyes shone a friendly green. Tod found Edd the easier of the twins to talk to. “You look really scary,” she ventured.

“Good,” Edd said with a smile. “So what’s up in the Forest then?”

The words came tumbling out in a rush. “It’s the Ormlet. The witches have taken it but Spit Fyre’s found it and Septimus wants to go and get it and we can **Track** it with my **Tracker** ball called Bing and we have to go right now!”

“Crumbs,” said Edd.

The other wolverine pulled off its head to reveal the short-haired Erik. “We’re not getting out of these suits,” Erik said. “They took ages to get on.”

“No need,” Edd said. “They’re ideal Forest dress.”

Septimus knew better than to react when two giant wolverines joined them in the Great Hall. He always made a point of being unflustered with the twins, particularly Erik. Besides, he reckoned the wolverine costumes might turn out to be an advantage in the Forest at night.

Not wishing to draw attention to themselves, the party set off through the quieter alleyways, heading for the North Gate, the main entrance to the Castle. This was a large gatehouse that guarded the drawbridge and where Gringe, the gatekeeper, and his wife, Mrs. Gringe, lived.

The drawbridge was lowered at sunrise and raised at sunset. By the time the wolverine party arrived, the bridge was up, the Bridge Boy had gone home and Gringe was settling down beside a cheery fire for his nightly supper of stew. He was not pleased to hear insistent knocking on his front door. He was even less pleased when he learned that his callers required him to lower the drawbridge and that one of them was no less than the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, whose requests Gringe was duty-bound to grant. However, this did not stop Gringe from making things difficult.

“The Bridge Boy’s gone ’ome,” Gringe growled. “I can’t be doing this on my own at my age. Come back tomorrow.” He began to close the door but Septimus stopped it with his foot.

“You are obliged by your terms of employment to operate the drawbridge whenever I require it,” Septimus told Gringe. “And I require it *now*.” Septimus fixed Gringe with what he hoped was a steely stare.

Gringe—who still thought of Septimus as the annoying Apprentice kid who used to play chicken on the bridge—was not happy. “It’ll cost you,” he said.

Septimus was ready: he knew he had to pay for out-of-hours bridge use. He held out a heavy shining silver coin—a crown, no less—and Gringe’s eyes widened. He hadn’t seen one of those for a long time. Mrs. Gringe would be thrilled. She might even heat up his stew again if he asked nicely.

Fifteen minutes later the drawbridge was down and Gringe was hot, sweaty and out of breath. “You . . . staying out all . . . night?” he asked. “Or are you . . . comin’ back?”

“We’re coming back,” Septimus told him.

Gringe sighed. “An’ I suppose you’ll want the bridge down again?”

“You suppose correctly,” Septimus assured him.

Gringe shook his head. He'd found the last ExtraOrdinary Wizard difficult at times, but she was nothing like this one. This one was crazy. What did he think he was doing, taking three kids and two of his daft brothers dressed like wolverines into the Forest at night?

As soon as they reached the far side of the Moat, Gringe wearily began the work of raising the bridge. At last he staggered into the gatehouse and slumped down in his chair by the fire. He was not impressed by Mrs. Gringe's comment that he'd catch his breath better if he'd only stop swearing for a few minutes. He had, he told her, a lot to swear about. And for once Mrs. Gringe did not disagree.

ILL MET BY TORCHLIGHT

Tod heard the clanking of the drawbridge chains and glanced back. She saw the massive bridge slowly rising into the air, leaving the bare bank of the dark Moat behind. It was an impressive sight, but not a comfortable one. The sight of their way back into the safety of the Castle disappearing gave her a bad feeling.

Sandwiched between the two wolverine Heaps, Tod, Oskar, Ferdie and Septimus walked swiftly along the winding path that led through the outlying trees, heading toward the dense darkness beyond. Tod noticed that the twins had adopted a loping gait that suited their costumes well—possibly a little too well. It seemed to her as though the Heap twins were transforming into actual Forest wolverines. Tod slipped between Oskar and Ferdie and linked arms; it was good to keep your friends close in the Forest.

Soon the moonlight was gone and densely packed, tall trees lined their narrow path. When Tod looked up she saw nothing but a thick canopy of leaves, and when she looked ahead she saw darkness. She felt as though the Forest was engulfing them. The **Tracker** ball began to push impatiently against her grip as if to remind her why she was there. "Shall I let Bing go now?" she asked Septimus.

"Bing is a **Tracker** ball," Septimus hastened to assure his brothers.

"Yeah," said Edd with a grin. "So we heard."

"Won't be easy following that in the nighttime Forest," Erik added.

“I know,” Septimus said. “But we can do it. Okay, Tod, time to—”

Edd interrupted him. “Wait a moment, Sep. There is something I want to say to our three young ones here. From now on we must practice what is known as Forest Mindfulness. With every step we take, we will think of ourselves as part of the Forest. We will plant our feet with care, understanding that we tread upon many tiny, living creatures and being aware that we walk through the territory of much larger ones. We will respect the trees and wish them well, but remember that as we go deeper into the Forest, not all trees will wish us well. Do you understand?”

Tod, Ferdie and Oskar nodded solemnly. Edd’s words had given them a sense of awe, which took the edge off the fear they had been feeling.

“Thank you, Edd,” Septimus whispered. He switched on his **Forest FlashLight**. A dull red beam lit up their immediate surroundings but did not spread far. It would allow them to see where they were going without alerting the nighttime inhabitants. “Okay, Tod,” Septimus said. “It’s time to release Bing.”

Tod took Bing out of her pocket, cradled it in her hands and whispered, “**Track.**” She let the ball go and, unlike its behavior with the Captain of the Guard, it bounced on the spot, waiting for Tod to follow—because Tod had **Named** it, the ball considered her to be part of the **Track**. Bing set off at a low, slow bounce, regulating its pace so that Tod was easily able to keep up with it, keeping to paths that she could follow.

Bing took them slowly up into the less-explored northern plateau of the Forest. They walked silently with Tod and Edd in the lead, then Septimus, Oskar and Ferdie, with Erik at the back. Both of the Forest Heaps were on the alert, their eyes flicking from side to side, forever on guard.

They now began to hear shouting and see glimpses of the red glow of flames through the trees.

“Witch fire,” Edd muttered.

They were nearing a blind bend in the path when suddenly, hurtling around it came a cloaked figure carrying a familiar flash of blue.

“Ormie!” Oskar gasped. “Oh! That’s Ormie!”

It was also Marissa. Cloak flying, eyes flashing brilliant witch blue, she came thudding toward them with the Ormlet tucked under her arm.

Tod caught Bing on an upward bounce and shoved the **Tracker** ball deep into her pocket. Edd and Erik positioned themselves on the path, arms

folded, an impenetrable wolverine barrier through which Marissa was not going to pass.

But there was no need. Marissa skidded to a halt in front of them. “Oh, thank goodness you’ve come,” she said breathlessly. “Here’s your Orm thingy. Septimus, take it. Quick!” She pushed past Edd and Erik and thrust the Ormlet into Septimus’s arms. “Keep it safe. It needs to go under the Wizard Tower as soon as you can get it there.”

Septimus was dumbstruck. He stood holding the limp Ormlet, unable to believe that Marissa had actually *given* it to him. Marissa was in no mood for explaining anything. She grabbed Septimus’s arm and hissed, “Come on, Wiz, get a move on. There’s a whole swarm of witches after it.” She pointed back into the trees. The flames were coming closer and the shouts getting louder.

“I thought they were with *you*,” Septimus said.

“No way, dumbo,” Marissa said. “They are *chasing* me. So get a move on. Or do some wiz-bang spell or something to stop them. See ya!” Marissa darted into the shadows of the trees and was gone.

Septimus looked anxiously at the rapidly advancing flames. “We must get back to the Castle right now.”

“But the drawbridge is up,” Tod said.

“I know,” Septimus said. “I’ll do a **Transport** back and get Gringe to start lowering it. Edd, Erik, can you find a safe way to get everyone down to the bridge?”

“No worries,” said Edd and Erik together.

“Oskar—for you.” Septimus thrust the Ormlet into Oskar’s arms. Oskar was shocked at how heavy it was.

“Now *go*,” Septimus said, looking anxiously back through the trees at the rapidly advancing flames.

Edd and Erik beckoned Tod, Oskar and Ferdie into the trees, leaving Septimus alone on the track. When Tod glanced back she saw Septimus enclosed in a haze of purple mist. She longed to hang back and watch the **Transport**, but a brusque “*Come on, Tod*” from Erik set her running to catch up. When she next looked around, Septimus was gone.

ON THE RUN

Oskar was struggling to keep up. The Ormlet was a dead weight. Its smooth blue scales were slippery; its wings were spiky yet delicate, and Oskar was afraid of damaging them. Its spiny legs swung awkwardly, hitting his knees as he hurried along.

Edd saw that Oskar was in trouble. “Hey, let me take it,” he said.

“No, I can do it,” Oskar insisted.

“No, you can’t,” Ferdie told Oskar sternly.

“I can!”

“Oskie,” Ferdie hissed. “Give it to Edd.”

“But—”

“Oskie, you are slowing us down. The witches will catch us and then *they’ll* have the Ormlet. And it will be all *your fault*.”

Sullenly Oskar handed the Ormlet to Edd, who slung the creature around his shoulders with ease. The Ormlet lay there like a shimmering blue stole.

“Whoooooo-hoo!” A wild, ululating whoop, high and piercing, shocked them all. The witches had left the path and were plunging into the undergrowth, following their trail, the flames of their torches sending up showers of sparks into the darkness.

Erik glanced back. “Too many to fight,” he said, sounding a little regretful. Better do a rabbit run, yeah? There’s one down there. By the three stones.”

“I know,” said Edd. “I found it, remember?” He turned to Tod, Oskar and Ferdie. “Okay, guys, this is how we disappear in the Forest. There are secret paths everywhere. The trick is to get into one without anyone seeing you. Once we’re in it, keep dead quiet and follow me, got that?”

They followed Edd. He wove past a couple more trees and then, at three big round stones covered in moss, like a rabbit diving for its burrow, he plunged into the undergrowth.

Tod fought her way in after him. She fended off a barrage of sharp twigs and skidded down a slope to find a low corridor, clear of undergrowth, that ran beneath the bushes. Ferdie and Oskar, then Erik came tumbling after

her. They set off silently following Edd, who stooped low as he loped along, carrying the Ormlet easily on his shoulders. Erik was last, watchful as ever.

As they hurried through the rabbit run, the whoops and shouts of the witches became ever louder. Soon it seemed to Tod that the witches were so close she only had to push her arm through the undergrowth and she would touch them. Edd stopped and turned, putting a finger to his lips. They all stood silent, hearts thumping, while, to their relief, the noise of the chase passed by.

They set off once more through the run with Edd keeping a fast pace along the twists and turns that took them around densely packed trees. Oskar felt as though they were traveling through the inside of a giant bracken snake and quite forgot his disappointment in not holding the Ormlet. He loved every moment of the rabbit run, and as he padded along he became determined to make one in his home forest, the Far.

The run finished on top of a small hill overlooking the Castle. They stumbled into the night air with burrs on their clothes and twigs in their hair, and stopped to take stock. Below, the lights of the Castle shone clear, but it was too dark to see whether the drawbridge had been lowered. They decided to take the track down and hope for the best. As they descended toward the flat grassy area beside the Moat, a movement above made them all look up.

“Spit Fyre!” Edd and Erik said together.

“He wants Ormie,” Oskar said.

Edd shifted the dead weight that lay across his shoulders. “He’s welcome to it,” he growled. “It’s like carrying a sack of dead fish.”

Oskar didn’t like the sound of that. “Ormie’s not . . . *dead*, is she?” he whispered.

“The dog breath in my ear tells me not, Oskar,” Edd replied.

Spit Fyre began to descend, but at the sounds of a high-pitched whistle from Septimus in the Castle the dragon stopped. He hovered for some seconds, considering what to do—the Ormlet won. Spit Fyre dropped through the air and landed on the grass in front of them.

“Great,” said Edd, “he can get us out of here. Come on, you guys.”

They headed off fast toward Spit Fyre, loud whoops from the Forest spurring them on. Edd thrust the Ormlet at Spit Fyre, who reached out his great head and gently took the Ormlet in his mouth. Then, before anyone

had a chance to clamber aboard, Spit Fyre raised his wings and brought them down with a great rush of air that knocked Oskar, hovering anxiously beside the Ormlet, off his feet. And then the dragon was gone, rising up and flying swiftly across the Moat. They watched his dark shape disappear over the North Gate.

“Maybe he’s going to come back with Sep and get us?” Edd asked hopefully.

“And maybe he’s not,” Erik suggested. Loud shouts from the North Gate and a rumble of falling masonry stopped the discussion.

“Doesn’t sound good,” Edd said. “We’d better shift for ourselves.”

As they hurried across the grass toward the Moat they heard the welcome clanking of the drawbridge chains. They ran fast, watching the massive shape of the drawbridge slowly descending. They were halfway across the open grass when there was a loud clang and the drawbridge juddered to a halt.

“It’s stuck,” Tod said.

Erik swore. From across the Moat the unmistakable voice of Gringe echoed his sentiments.

“Bother,” said the more restrained Edd. “What say, Erik? Go for the bridge and hope it gets free?”

An ululating cry came from the Forest. “Yeah,” said Erik said. “Go for it.”

All eyes upon the drawbridge, they raced across the open space. They reached the resting plate—the long, flat stone on which the end of the drawbridge should sit—and looked up. As they stared at the dark underbelly of the bridge looming high above, willing it to move, a great scream of triumph came from the outskirts of the forest. All five wheeled around to see the witches, torches ablaze, breaking out from the cover of the trees.

“Sep! We need help!” Edd yelled across the Moat.

Septimus appeared in a gatehouse window. “Spit Fyre won’t leave the blasted Ormlet!” he yelled. “I’m getting a boat!”

“Too late for that,” Erik muttered, watching witches advancing toward them.

The witches were silent now. They had formed a semicircle and were walking slowly and deliberately toward them. The flames of their torches

burned bright in the still night air, and as they came nearer, Tod, Oskar and Ferdie heard something they never wanted to hear again—the Witch **Hum**.

There was a splash from the other side of the Moat and the sound of oars being hastily pushed into rowlocks along with some muttered curses. Tod glanced around to see Septimus struggling with a large rowboat, and she longed to show him how to do it properly. To the background of splashing and the sound of clanking and shouting from within the gatehouse, the witch semicircle advanced in step, their low, menacing **Hum** growing louder.

Edd, Erik, Tod, Oskar and Ferdie turned to face the advance, standing shoulder to shoulder. “Stare them out,” Edd whispered.

“It spooks them,” added Erik.

The witches stopped a few feet away, close enough for them to feel the heat of the flames. Bryony and Madron stepped forward. “Hand over the creature and we will do you no harm,” said Bryony.

“We don’t have it,” Erik said steadily.

“As you see,” Edd added.

“We see nothing,” Bryony told him.

“Because you are hiding it,” Madron said.

“If you do not hand it over,” Bryony said icily, “we will take it from you.”

“I am sure you would rather we did not do that,” Madron added. “Because your dinky little suits of fur . . .” She giggled and Edd flushed. He realized he and Erik looked somewhat silly, and with an audience of young witches, he wished they didn’t. But what Madron went on to say made looking silly seem a minor problem. “. . . will burn *beautifully*.”

Edd and Erik exchanged anxious glances.

“We will count to seven,” Bryony said.

“And then we will set fire to a whole *Heap* of fur,” Madron finished.

Slowly, the witches began to count, “One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . sev—”

Suddenly there was a flash of purple and Septimus was there, standing between his brothers and the flames, brandishing a long, shimmering sword with a rain of sparks flying from its tip. “You want to play with fire?” he yelled. “Then play with this!”

There were no takers. The witches threw down their torches in disgust. “That’s not fair, Septimus Heap,” Bryony told him. “We don’t have any swords.”

“You don’t have any *conscience*,” Septimus reposted. “Now shove off, the lot of you.”

The witches shoved off.

Enclosed in a semicircle of abandoned burning torches like the footlights of a stage, the three Heap brothers and the Tribe of Three watched their audience straggle away into the night, throwing curses into the wind.

A sudden yell from the gatehouse brought them back to reality. “Ware bridge, ’ware bridge!” And then, when they didn’t leap out of the way fast enough, “Get out of the blasted way, you nurdles! The bloomin’ bridge is comin’ down! Fast!”

A rapid rattling of chains ensued, there was a loud splash, and Edd slipped and fell into the Moat.

PATCHOULI

Spit Fyre was waiting for them in the Wizard Tower courtyard. The dragon was unusually subdued. He sat, head bowed, with the Ormlet lying limp across his two front feet. Septimus stopped a respectful distance away. “Hey, Spit Fyre,” he said gently.

Spit Fyre put his head on one side and snorted like an uncertain horse. Septimus took a step back. He resented how the Ormlet had come between him and his dragon, but he told himself that it was ridiculous to be jealous of a small reptile that was going to explode in a few days time. He also told himself that had it not been for the Ormlet, Spit Fyre would probably still be away on his search for a mate; it was the Ormlet that had brought Spit Fyre home. And so, with a more generous feeling he said, “Spit Fyre, your Ormlet is about to **TransfOrm**. It’s time for you to say good-bye.”

Spit Fyre would not meet Septimus’s eye. Septimus sighed—he knew that meant trouble. He decided to try to explain. “Spit Fyre, your Ormlet has gone into Stasis and—”

Suddenly Oskar was at his side. “But Ormie *hasn’t* gone into Stasis,” Oskar burst out. “I *know* she hasn’t. Please, please don’t put her away. She’ll be better soon.”

“Oskar,” Septimus said gently, “you mustn’t grieve. This is the Ormlet’s natural way of being.”

Tod put her arm around Oskar. “Hey, Oskie,” she said. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay!” Oskar shouted. “And it’s not Stasis. *It’s not!*”

Septimus looked Oskar in the eye. “Oskar, why are you so sure? Do you know something we don’t?”

Tod said nothing. It was for Oskar to say—or not.

Oskar could not bring himself to tell Septimus what he’d done. It sounded so wrong. And stupid. And nasty. And besides, he told himself, the **Charms** were part of the Manuscriptorium’s stock and so he would be breaking the Manuscriptorium Promise. Oskar stared at his feet and said nothing.

Septimus knew Oskar was hiding something and he did not like being lied to. “Oskar, the Ormlet is going into the Orm Pit, and that is final,” he said. “If it upsets you I suggest you go home now. I’m sure they’ll wonder where you are at the Manuscriptorium.”

Oskar stared at Septimus in dismay. The Manuscriptorium was not home—home was his PathFinder village. And right now that was the only place he wanted to be. He’d failed the Ormlet, he’d lied to Septimus and he’d helped Drammer Makken do something bad. He’s messed up all his chances. It was time to go.

“Okay,” Oskar said quietly. “I’ll go home.” He shook away Tod’s comforting arm and then, to Septimus’s surprise—but not Tod’s or Ferdie’s—Oskar did not turn around to walk back to the Manuscriptorium. Instead he ran past Spit Fyre to the base of the Wizard Tower where it joined the white marble steps, took a sharp left and disappeared into the white marble.

“Oskie!” Ferdie yelled, and raced after her twin.

Tod listened to the sound of her friends’ retreating footsteps and then the silence as they stepped into the **Vanishing Point** and were gone. It was so strange, Tod thought, that right now they were both already hundreds of miles away, in Marcia’s Hub—the first of many on their way back home. Tod turned around to look at the courtyard; she saw a shower of brilliant blue **Sprites** drifting down and smiled. She was sad that Oskar and Ferdie

had gone, but there was no way she wanted to run after them. She was in a **Magykal** place—and there was an Ormlet to attend to.

“Hey! Sep!” A shout came from beneath the Great Arch and suddenly there was Marissa, running across the courtyard, her green cloak flying behind her. She looked, Septimus thought, wild in a rather interesting way. As she scooted to a halt in front of him, trying to catch her breath, Septimus sternly told himself that Marissa was trouble. “What do you want?” he snapped.

Marissa looked surprised. “What’s got your goat?” she said.

“It’s more a question of what got his Orm,” said Edd.

Marissa bestowed a smiley giggle upon Edd. She turned back to Septimus and her expression darkened. “Septimus Heap. I risked my *life* to get that Orm away from Bryony’s crew and bring the revolting little creature to you. Do I get any thanks? No. Not one little *Oh, thank you, Marissa, for saving our Orm and bringing it back to us*. Not one. Well, Septimus, that is the last time I ever do anything to help you out. *Ever*.” With that she spun around and began to stalk out of the courtyard. But not too fast, because she wanted to be within earshot when Septimus called her back, as she knew he would.

“Marissa!” Septimus yelled. “Wait a minute!”

Marissa walked five more steps just to keep him guessing and then turned around. “*What?*” she demanded. She folded her arms and did not move. If Septimus wanted to apologize, he could come to her. Which he did.

Septimus was pretty sure now that Marissa would soon be Witch Mother of the Wendron Witches and he had no wish to fall out with her. Life was so much easier if the Wendrons were, if not actively on the Castle’s side, then at least not plotting against it. So Septimus hurried over and said, “Marissa, I’m sorry. This Orm has been nothing but trouble right from the start. And we have to get it under the Wizard Tower fast—now, before it explodes.”

“Explodes?” Marissa sounded horrified.

“Well, first it makes a cocoon, then it explodes and out comes an Orm. Well, that’s the idea, anyway.”

“A proper Orm? One that makes lapis lazuli?” Marissa asked just to make sure.

“So we hope,” Septimus said. “Which is why I have to get it safely into its reinforced pit beneath the Wizard Tower. Out of harm’s way.”

“I know you do,” Marissa told him soothingly. “And this is where it must go. The Orm belongs here. I really feel that.” Marissa paused and placed her hand over her heart. “I *feel* it. Which is why, Septimus, I brought it back to you.”

Septimus had a distinct feeling that, like Oskar, Marissa was not being entirely straight with him. He had noticed since becoming ExtraOrdinary Wizard that people did not always tell him the whole truth, but he had learned that there was little he could do about it. So he merely smiled and said, “Thank you, Marissa. Thank you very much indeed.”

“You’re welcome,” Marissa said. “Just get that Ormlet of yours settled in its little nest under the dear old WT before anyone else tries to grab it, and then lock it in and keep it there.”

“I intend to,” Septimus assured her.

“Great. I hope it all goes well.” Marissa gave Septimus a hug and nearly drowned him in the scent of patchouli. Then she hurried away through the lapis-blue shadows of the Great Arch, leaving Septimus feeling quite bemused. It was only after Marissa had disappeared that Septimus realized that he had never asked her if she had seen Jenna’s circlet. He felt cross with himself for forgetting all about it, but the scent of patchouli had quite driven the circlet from his mind. Septimus comforted himself with the thought that even if Marissa did know anything about it, she wouldn’t have told him.

Marissa ran across the brightly lit, almost-white limestone paving of Wizard Way and slipped into the welcome darkness of Sled Alley, where she stopped and looked furtively about her. When she was satisfied there was no one around, she fumbled deep into her secret pocket, which hung inside the lining of her cloak. She drew out a gleaming golden circlet and, holding it in two hands, she placed it almost reverently upon her head, as though crowning herself.

Then she walked slowly, regally even, down Sled Alley to the Manuscriptorium boathouse. Tied to the mooring post were four rowboats bobbing gently, waiting patiently to ferry partygoers across to the Infirmary.

A few minutes later Marissa was rowing across the Moat, heading for the Infirmary bank.

In the East Gate Lookout Tower two rats were taking the night air. One—a tubby rat of advanced years named Stanley—was seated in a wheeled basket chair. The other, his adopted son, Morris, was perched on the battlements beside him. They had come to watch for shooting stars, one of Stanley’s favorite pastimes.

While Stanley leaned back in his chair, gazing up at the sky, Morris’s attention was on more earthly matters. “Look, Da, Queen Jenna’s going off to that party,” he said.

Stanley peered into the night. He saw the rowboat, the rower wearing a witch’s cloak and the glint of gold around dark hair. He shook his head sorrowfully. Royalty was not what it used to be, that was for sure.

INTO THE ORM PIT

Septimus walked slowly back to Spit Fyre, steeling himself for what he had to do. He approached carefully, while Spit Fyre kept an oblique, suspicious eye upon him, watching his every step. A few feet away from his dragon, Septimus stopped. He felt that any closer would intrude into Spit Fyre’s personal space. The last thing he needed was to spook Spit Fyre and send him rocketing away into the night with the Ormlet.

Septimus and Spit Fyre looked studiedly past each other, each waiting for the other to make the next move. This might have continued for some time had it not been for a brilliant blue **Magykal Sprite** that drifted down and landed softly upon the Ormlet. It sat on the Ormlet’s pointy snout for some seconds, infusing the creature with a soft, **Magykal** light, and then it slowly faded away.

Spit Fyre looked up and at last, he allowed Septimus to meet his gaze. A flash of **Synchronicity** passed between them and Septimus knew that Spit Fyre understood what must happen to his Ormlet.

Septimus knelt down beside his dragon and took the Ormlet from its bed on Spit Fyre’s scaly feet. Then with the Ormlet lying heavy in his arms,

he walked over to his Apprentice. “Tod,” he said, “would you come with me into the Orm Pit?”

It was a solemn procession that made its way around the base of the Wizard Tower—Tod, Septimus with the unconscious Ormlet, and behind them a slow, sad dragon. Behind the dragon came two giant wolverines: Edd and Erik, still on guard.

At the dark circle of the gaping mouth that was soon to swallow Spit Fyre’s baby, Septimus stopped. He turned to his dragon and held the Ormlet out for a last good-bye. Spit Fyre nuzzled the Ormlet and then shuffled back, his head bowed.

It was time to go.

Tod opened the grille and stepped inside. She took out her **FlashLight** and its cool blue light showed how beautifully the tunnel was made—smooth bricks laid to create an almost perfect circle, apart from a narrow strip of limestone for the floor shining white like a backbone.

Septimus squeezed in and the tunnel was suddenly full. He was too tall to stand upright and was forced to hunch down over the Ormlet. “Okay,” he said, “let’s go.”

The tunnel dropped steeply downward and wound around in a very tight curve, its coils reflecting what the Ormlet would soon become—an empty rock-transforming worm. After seven turns the brick walls gave way to lapis lazuli and Tod knew that they were now burrowing through the bedrock of the Wizard Tower. Down, down, down she went, her boots throwing a tinny echo as she walked ever deeper into the chill of the rock. Tod had lost count of the turns when the tunnel leveled out and showed a smaller dark circle ahead.

“This is it,” Septimus said, his voice hissing along the tunnel like a snake. “The entrance to the Orm Pit.”

The Orm Pit was tiny—an egg-shaped chamber carved to fit what was still, when curled up, an egg-shaped reptile.

“Do you mind going in?” Septimus asked. “I don’t think I’ll fit.”

Tod wasn’t at all keen, but she didn’t think that Septimus would fit either. And even if he did squeeze in, she doubted he would be able to get out again. So she rolled her **FlashLight** into the Orm Pit and crawled in after it. Then she shuffled around to face Septimus and he passed her the Ormlet. Tod took its dead weight in her arms and very carefully she laid it

upon the bare lapis lazuli. The **FlashLight** threw misshapen shadows of the Ormlet up to the curving roof, turning it into a spiny, spiked demon. Tod shivered. She wanted to get out as soon as possible.

Septimus stuck his head through the entrance, his face made eerie by the shadows cast by the **FlashLight**.

“Tod,” he whispered, “I didn’t want to say this in front of Spit Fyre, but I think the Ormlet has died.”

“No!” Tod was horrified.

“It’s not breathing. But it’s best to put it here, just in case.”

Tod was speechless. *She and Oskar had killed the Ormlet.*

“Anyway, I’ll just say good-bye . . . for Spit Fyre,” Septimus whispered. He reached in and laid his hand on the chubby shape of the reptile, smooth and ice-cold to his touch. “Rest in peace,” he murmured, then he looked at Tod and smiled. “Thank you,” he said. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Tears in her eyes, Tod shook her head. *You wouldn’t have had to do this at all without me*, she thought.

They emerged into the chill of a cloudless night. Tod watched miserably while Septimus walked over to his waiting dragon and patted him gently on his velvety snout. Then she accompanied Septimus around the base of the Wizard Tower, unable to stop thinking of the little blue body of the Ormlet, once so vibrant, now lying cold and dulled in the darkness deep below. She sniffed and rubbed the tears from her eyes and Septimus silently passed her his handkerchief.

As they headed toward the **Hidden** arch beneath the steps, Septimus said, “I thought you might have wanted to go after Oskar and Ferdie.”

“No,” Tod said. “I want to stay here. I’m your Apprentice now.” *But not a good one*, she thought.

“And I’m very glad you are,” Septimus said. He saw Tod’s troubled expression. “I know it’s sad about the Ormlet, but what really matters is that Oraton-Marr doesn’t have it.”

Tod said nothing. She thought that if Oraton-Marr had kept the Ormlet at least it would still be alive.

As they drew level with the **Hidden** arch it began to glow with a bright purple light. Tod and Septimus exchanged glances. Someone was Coming Through. But who?



PART VI

SNOWSTORM

S*now Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful*—and the most exceedingly furious—came storming out of the arch in a flurry of snow. From within the swirling whiteness of the snowflakes, Tod could see the distinctive form of the Snow Princess, encased in her **Emotoclime** (a personal weather bubble manifested when a person becomes highly emotional, the use of snow being particular to the inhabitants of the Eastern SnowPlains). The **Blizzard** swirled off across the courtyard, with Septimus in pursuit.

The rush of freezing air in Driffa's wake brought another traveler through the Way, someone Tod was very pleased to see: Marcia Overstrand. Marcia smiled at Tod, took in the scene in the courtyard and hurried after Septimus.

“Septimus. Listen—” she said, grabbing his arm.

“Marcia, let *go*,” Septimus said.

Marcia faltered as she saw the lack of welcome in Septimus's eyes. “Septimus. Please. Driffa has something very important to tell you. Please listen to her.”

Septimus did not reply. He turned on his heel and strode away after Driffa.

Meanwhile, another figure emerged from the arch: a swarthy man sporting a cluster of gold earrings and wearing a red silk padded jacket with a large knife sheathed in a scabbard hanging from his belt. He was Milo Banda, Marcia's husband of just over a year. After giving a conspiratorial wink to Tod, Milo hurried over to Marcia, who was walking dejectedly back from her brush-off by Septimus.

“I tried to explain,” she said miserably. “But he won't listen.”

“You stay right here,” Milo said. “I'm having a word with that young Heap.”

Septimus was hovering anxiously on the edge of the snowstorm. It was a dramatic sight. The swirling snowflakes sparkled and glistened, shining

with the blues, greens and occasional pinks and oranges of the **Magykal** lights of the Wizard Tower.

“Septimus, a word, please.” Without waiting for a reply, Milo said what he had come to say. “There are times in one’s life when you look back and wish someone had given you some fatherly advice. And this, Septimus, is one of those times you will look back on. And now I’m giving you that advice. So listen, if you don’t mind.”

Septimus frowned. He didn’t like Milo’s tone at all.

Milo continued. “I know I’m not your father—”

“No, you’re not,” Septimus agreed curtly.

“However, I am the father of your adoptive sister and as such I hope you will take this as well-meant.”

“Take *what* as well-meant?” Septimus asked snappily.

“Advice,” Milo snapped back. “Listen to Marcia. Don’t shut her out. I know you’ve disagreed on all this wretched Orm stuff, but it seems to me she might actually have a point. I suspect you might think so too, once you’ve heard what Princess Driffa has to say.”

“If I ever get to hear it,” Septimus said, staring at the **Blizzard** and irritably brushing the snowflakes from his cloak.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” Milo said with a wry smile. “You’ll get to hear it, all right.”

A ROUND TABLE

At the top of the Wizard Tower in Septimus’s rooms was a new, round table. Septimus had installed it in order to make discussions flow better, but that evening the table didn’t seem to be working.

It had taken all of Milo’s persuasive powers to get Driffa to consent to even sit down, and now the Snow Princess sat silently simmering with rage. Her face was so pale as to be almost translucent and her hair hung in snow-white braids. The only color about her was blue: ice-blue eyes, thin blue ribbons threaded through her braids and bright blue fingernails.

Beside Driffa sat Marcia, a colorful contrast with her dark wavy hair, deep green eyes and multicolored cloak. Marcia too was quiet: subdued and

deadly serious. Next to her was Milo, tipping back in his chair, trying to look nonchalant but succeeding only in looking like he was about to fall backward. Tod was sitting next to the empty chair that should have held Septimus. She excused herself to go and help him.

Insisting on making hot chocolate for them all, Septimus had taken refuge in the kitchen. As Tod came in he looked up anxiously. “All right?” he whispered.

“No one’s saying anything,” Tod whispered in return. “They’re waiting for you. Can I help?”

Septimus gave Tod the mugs to carry in and followed her with the steaming jug of hot chocolate. Aware of Driffa’s gimlet gaze upon him, Septimus carefully poured her the first drink and placed the mug in front of her. “You must be cold,” he said, “after being in all that snow.”

“Snow! Huh!” Driffa snorted with derision. She sounded, Septimus thought, not unlike her rather haughty horse.

The mugs were soon full and Septimus knew he could delay no longer. He sat down, took a deep breath and said, “Princess Driffa, welcome to the Wizard Tower. It is good to see you. I trust you received my letter?”

Driffa raised her fist and for a moment Septimus thought she was going to punch him. He did not move a muscle. In a sudden movement, Driffa flung open her fingers and threw a balled-up piece of paper high over everyone’s head. With deadly accuracy, it hit the middle of the fire. The flames flared up around it, momentarily bright green, then died away.

“*That*, Septimus Heap, is what I think of your letter!” Driffa said.

Septimus knew his letter wasn’t great, but he didn’t think it was that bad. “Driffa . . . I mean, Princess Driffa. I apologize if my letter offended you. I—”

Driffa’s blue eyes seemed to darken. “It is not your letter that offended me, ExtraOrdinary Wizard. It is your *treachery*.”

Septimus shook his head in bewilderment. “Treachery? What treachery?”

“Ha!” Driffa snorted. “You promise me that you will return our sacred Orm Egg to us. You even tell me not to send our own sorcerers after it, for you will do that yourself. And then you betray us. You find the Egg but you do not bring it back. Instead, you hatch it. *How could you?*”

Tod longed to tell Driffa that this was not what happened, that the hatching of the Egg had nothing to do with Septimus at all, but Tod knew the argument was not hers to interrupt. She must let Septimus speak for himself.

But Septimus was dumbstruck.

It was Marcia who spoke. “Princess Driffa. As I tried to explain before, it was not Septimus who hatched your Egg. It was Oraton-Marr—the sorcerer who enslaved your people and destroyed your sacred places. It was in fact Septimus’s dragon, Spit Fyre, who snatched the hatchling from the sorcerer’s grasp. All Septimus did was bring the creature here and keep it safe.”

Driffa glared at Septimus. “I do not listen to excuses,” she said. “The fact is you gave me your promise, upon your own **Magyk**, that you would bring back our sacred Egg of the Orm. And I hear nothing from you—*not a word*—until your letter inviting me to see the hatchling—the very results of you breaking your promise!”

“But—” Septimus just managed to slip in before Driffa continued.

“And now we, in the Eastern SnowPlains, are condemned to live with the results of your broken promise. This.” In a sudden movement, Driffa jabbed her hands outward like two fans, splaying her fingers.

Tod gasped. The silver bands of her rings glinted, but what Tod remembered as brilliant blue lapis stones within them were now dull, powdery gray.

Septimus looked blank. “What?” he asked.

“Your Apprentice understands what you do not,” Driffa snapped.

Septimus threw Tod a questioning glance.

“The lapis in Princess Driffa’s rings isn’t blue anymore,” Tod explained. Septimus still looked puzzled, so Tod continued. “Princess Driffa lent me the big ring so I could find the Heart of the Ways. It’s the same ring. But the lapis has changed. It’s turned gray.”

A chill ran through Septimus and the color drained from his face. He stared at Driffa’s rings in horror, while in his mind he saw once again the ball of sticky gray dust in Simon’s eye socket.

Driffa was pleased to at last get a reaction from Septimus. She managed a doleful smile for Tod. She felt sorry for her, being Apprenticed to such a useless Wizard.

“Septimus,” Marcia said quietly. “*All* of the lapis in Driffa’s home has undergone this change.”

“*All*,” said Driffa. “All of our beautiful lapis. The blue Pinnacle is a pile of gray dust. Our sacred Orm Chamber collapsed a few days ago. The Heart of the Ways is crumbling as I speak.”

“No!” Septimus said. “This can’t be possible. It . . . it can’t be.” But even as he spoke, he knew that it was.

“This, Septimus Heap,” Driffa said, “is what happens to our **Enchantment** without the Orm Egg.” She looked at Marcia. “I do not wish to speak to him. Please, tell him what you told me. Tell him the reason for this.”

Marcia did not want to undermine Septimus’s position as ExtraOrdinary Wizard by instructing him like a student. “I am sure the ExtraOrdinary Wizard knows the reason,” she demurred.

Septimus was not sure that he did know the reason. He looked at Marcia. “Please, tell us all,” he said. “My Apprentice would like to hear.”

“Very well,” Marcia said. “Septimus, as you know, there are consequences of the kind of massive Earth **Enchantment** that Driffa’s people have in the SnowPlains. The bigger the **Enchantment**, the more delicate and finely balanced it becomes. The most complex of these ancient **Magyks**—and the one of the Eastern SnowPlains is probably the most complex there has ever been, for it spreads across the whole world—are often held in equilibrium by a **KeyStone**, just like any archway. These Earth **Enchantments** are remarkably stable—until the **KeyStone** goes, then they tumble like ninepins. It is called an **UnRaveling**.”

Septimus nodded. He knew now what was coming.

“It seems,” Marcia said, “that the Orm Egg was such a **KeyStone**.”

“How, er, how fast is it collapsing?” Septimus asked.

“Driffa?” asked Marcia.

Driffa addressed her answer to Marcia alone. “It began slowly. One day a few weeks after our Sacred Egg was stolen, I was looking at our beautiful blue Pinnacle from the battlement walk and I noticed that its tip was no longer sharp. When I looked through my **Enlarging Glass** I saw why. It had crumbled to dust. I asked our sorcerers what was happening and they went away to think about it. When they returned they told me that it was because we had lost the Egg.” Driffa looked angrily at Septimus. “The sorcerers we

have left are not very good ones, but even they are better than you, Septimus Heap. Our sorcerers begged to be allowed to search for the Egg, but I told them that you would soon bring it back and I did not want them to hinder your search in any way. The Pinnacle continued to crumble. Our people were frightened, afraid that soon their homes would be nothing more than dust.”

Driffa gave a bitter laugh. “I told them not to worry. I told them you were a powerful sorcerer and you would find the Egg and bring it back to us. But you didn’t bring it back. Instead you kept it for yourself, while we watched our **Enchanted** snows turn to slush and our beautiful lapis crumble to dust. You lied to me. And because of that I have lied to my people.”

Septimus looked stunned. “Driffa, please believe me. I did *not* take the Egg. It was already hatched when I found it.”

Driffa glared at him. “You betrayed us.”

“I have an idea.” Milo’s voice made everybody jump. All eyes turned toward him. “How about letting the Princess here have the Ormlet?”

Tod and Septimus exchanged glances. This was not a good time to mention that the Ormlet was dead. They were saved by Driffa herself.

“The hatchling is no good to us,” Driffa told Milo. “The **Enchantment** was within the *Egg*. It was released with the hatching of the creature.”

Milo looked at Marcia. “Would it be possible to restore the **Enchantment** with another egg?”

“Yes, it would,” Marcia replied. “It needs to be placed exactly where it was before. And then there must be a reenactment of the original **Incantation.**”

“So if you have a new Orm, then surely, one day, it will create a new egg?” asked Milo.

“Ha!” Driffa said scathingly. “One little egg. Buried deep in thousands of miles of rock. How do you suggest we find *that*?”

Milo was not to be deterred. “But surely, Princess, there are other Orm Eggs from ancient Orms still to be found?”

“There are none,” Driffa told him. “They were plundered thousands of years ago by a pack of thieving shamans.” Driffa looked down at her ring. Very deliberately, she stuck her long blue fingernail into the soft gray rock and flicked it. Gray grit skittered onto the table. “So much for your **Magyk**, Septimus Heap. You are not as powerful as you think you are.” Driffa was

silent for a moment. “Or as I thought you were either,” she said a little sadly.

Driffa pushed back her chair and stood up. A few snowflakes began to fall. “Septimus Heap,” she said. “I came here only to tell you about your future destruction, so that you will be as miserable as we are. Because, like a slow fire inside a wall, the crumbling of our **Enchantment** will spread through the Ancient Ways. And because you are joined to our Heart of the Ways it will reach you eventually. One day the rock on which your tower is built will turn to dust. Your lapis will be gone, your **Magyk**—such as it is—will be gone, and your precious Tower will be gone. All will be dust. And there is nothing you can do about it. *Nothing at all.*”

Trailing snowflakes, Driffa strode to the door. It threw itself open with a flourish—the large purple door had a fine sense of drama—and the Snow Princess was gone, leaving a cloud of snow and her last angry words hanging in the air.

Septimus looked stricken. He jumped to his feet.

“Let her go, Septimus,” Marcia said.

“I can’t let her go without hope,” he said. “I can’t . . .” He rushed off to his study. There was the loud hiss of a **Safe** being **UnSealed**, and in seconds Septimus reappeared holding a shard of lapis. “It’s from the Heart of the Ways, one of the pieces that Simon picked up. I kept it in my **Safe**. To remind me. Oh, it must go in a box. A **Sealed** box. To protect its **Enchantment.**”

Septimus turned to run back to the study, but Tod stopped him. “Please,” she said, hurrying over to him. “Please, have my StarChaser box. It’s from the **Charm** chamber.”

Septimus took it gratefully. “Perfect,” he said. Hurriedly, he flipped the lid open, put in the lapis shard and handed it to Marcia. “Please, will *you Seal* it? To keep the lapis free of the **UnRaveling**? I’m not thinking straight right now.”

Marcia took the little silver, star-strewn box and enclosed it in her hands. Murmuring words that Tod could not quite hear, Marcia focused her brilliant green eyes upon her hands. When a purple mist began to flow up from between her fingers Marcia gently placed the box on the table. It lay there, a few wisps of purple floating across its soft silver sheen. “All done,” she said.

“Thank you!” Septimus snatched up the box and raced out of the room. They heard the emergency siren sound on the stairs, and then all was silent.

Marcia sighed and walked over to the fire. “Well,” she said. “It’s a bad business.”

“But it’s not true, what Driffa said,” Tod said.

“Unfortunately, I suspect it might be,” Marcia replied.

“I meant what she said about there being nothing at all that we could do,” Tod explained. “*That’s* not true. There is always something you can do. *Always.*”

Marcia looked at Tod with approval. Here was an Apprentice after her own heart.

Septimus caught up with Driffa just as she was about to **Go Through** the **Hidden** arch. He pushed the starry box into her unwilling hand.

“I want nothing from you,” Driffa said.

“Please,” Septimus said. “Take it. Nothing here is from me. The box is from my Apprentice, the **Enchantment** is from Marcia, and inside is something that belongs to you anyway: a shard of lapis from the Heart of the Ways. Keep the box closed and the **Enchantment** will stay safe within.”

Driffa took the box. “A *shard*,” she said scornfully. “That is all you have left me.” She turned and walked into the **Hidden** arch, leaving Septimus staring at a blank, cold wall.

A WALK UPON THE WALLS

It was past midnight. Tod was asleep in her starry tent in the dorm, dreaming of her home village. Her **Alarm** was set and her backpack ready. Inside were the presents she had collected over the past weeks for her father and the Sarn family and her Ancient Ways travel kit. To her delight Septimus had told her that she could go home early for her birthday. Tod had Marcia to thank for that, for she had told Septimus that he should allow Tod to use the Ways while they were still there to be traveled.

Upstairs, in Septimus’s rooms, Milo was also asleep. He lay stretched out on Marcia’s old sofa. Marcia looked at both Milo and her old sofa

affectionately. “Milo can sleep anywhere,” she whispered to Septimus. “It comes of all those years of seafaring, I suppose.”

“I don’t think I’ll be sleeping much tonight,” Septimus said.

“Me neither,” Marcia agreed. She thought back to when the rooms had belonged to her, and Septimus had been her young Apprentice. Things had been so much simpler then.

“It all seems so complicated now,” Septimus said.

Marcia flashed him a quizzical look. “I could almost believe you were doing a **MindRead** there, Septimus.”

“I wouldn’t dream of intruding,” Septimus protested. “But I am allowed to read your expression, I hope?”

“Of course you are.” Marcia smiled. “Shall we go for a walk to clear our heads?”

They left Milo snoring and took the slow, dimly lit stairs down through the Wizard Tower. Ten minutes later Marcia and Septimus were wandering along the top of the Castle walls, heading toward the East Gate Lookout Tower. It was a cloudy night, the air was still, and as they walked they heard the sounds of a party coming from the old Infirmary on the other side of the Moat.

Marcia made no comment. Feeling a little uncomfortable, Septimus risked a few glances over to the Infirmary. There were candles burning in all the windows, and beneath the shouts, squeals and laughter came the sound of Forest pipes—a strange, unearthly wailing noise—and the insistent beat of tambours and drums.

After some minutes, Marcia said, “Septimus, I hope you will excuse me, but there is something I must say.”

“Go ahead,” Septimus said, and waited for Marcia’s opinion on parties. He got something rather different.

“The Ormlet.”

“Ah, *that*,” said Septimus.

“Yes, *that*. Septimus, I know you disagree with me about the danger of putting it under the Tower. But please, listen.”

“Marcia, there’s no point in discussing this—”

Marcia cut Septimus off. “Please, let me explain. Our **Magyk**, just like Driffa’s **Enchantment**, is a matter of a fine balance. However much lapis is under the Wizard Tower, it is the perfect amount for us. It works with the

people we have in the Tower, it works with the **Magyk** we—or now you—do. But if we change that balance by adding new lapis, who knows what might happen? Maybe anyone with a few spells at hand could walk into the Wizard Tower and have tremendous power.”

“I think that’s unlikely,” Septimus said. “Anyway, they’d have to get in first, wouldn’t they?”

“It might be someone you already know, someone you would happily allow into the Wizard Tower. What about that awful witch you went out with once—oh, what was her name?”

“Marissa,” Septimus mumbled. “And I didn’t ‘go out’ with her, as you put it. And anyway, I was only seventeen.”

“Whatever,” Marcia replied, using a word that had infuriated her when Septimus used it, but which she now found rather useful—and had a certain satisfaction in returning the favor. “So just imagine for a moment that Marissa decides she’d like to become ExtraOrdinary Wizard—”

A snort of derision burst from Septimus. “*Marissa!*”

“Shh,” Marcia hissed. “Sound travels over the water. Anyway, suppose Marissa walks into the Wizard Tower one day and starts spinning all kinds of spells to enable her to take over. And by then, courtesy of your Orm, you’ve got tons of nice fresh lapis underneath. New lapis is unpredictable. It has no loyalty: it will soak up anyone’s **Magyk**. Marissa’s spells might even *work*.”

“Marcia,” Septimus said, “trust me, you have nothing to worry about on that score. There won’t be any new lapis. I think the Ormlet is dead.”

“*What?*”

“Dead. I don’t know why. Oskar Sarn knows something, but he’s not telling. I suspect it might have been poisoned.”

“*Poisoned?*” Marcia exclaimed. “Well, that is a shock. And a great shame. Because I was going to suggest keeping the Ormlet in the Castle, although not under the Wizard Tower, of course. Maybe under the Palace. You know, just in case this is indeed the beginning of an **UnRaveling**.”

“Which I think,” Septimus said, “it very well might be.”

Marcia looked at her ex-Apprentice. “There’s something you haven’t told me yet,” she said.

“Simon’s eye has turned to dust,” Septimus said.

“*What?*” Marcia looked at Septimus as though he had gone crazy.

“You remember that the iris of his right eye turned to lapis. In the Heart of the Ways.”

“Are you going to tell me what I think you are?” Marcia asked.

“I am. I went to see him. His eye is a ball of gray dust.”

Marcia looked horrified. “The *whole* eye? Oh, how terrible. Poor Simon. And Lucy.”

“He’s afraid the dust will spread into his head.”

“I suppose,” Marcia said, “that depends on whether he has lapis fragments in there too.”

“I suppose it does,” Septimus agreed.

Marcia sighed. “I think Simon has given us our answer. This must indeed be an **UnRaveling**. Everything connected to the **Enchantment** disintegrates, however far away it may be.” She turned to look at the Wizard Tower. “I suspect Simon’s brush with the **Darke** has sped up the effect for him personally, but we will have to face it. The **UnRaveling** will reach the Wizard Tower. And very possibly sooner rather than later.”

Septimus felt sick. He too turned and looked back at the Wizard Tower. It rose up into the night, topped with its golden pyramid, shining with silvery, **Magykal** light and clothed with indigo, nighttime **Sprites** lazily floating around it. Its beauty and power took his breath away. He struggled to speak. “We . . . we can’t lose this. We *can’t*.”

Marcia sighed. “One day, maybe sooner than we think, we will lose it. And, even though your superb Apprentice thinks otherwise, there is actually nothing we can do to stop it.”

“Except put back the **KeyStone**.”

“Indeed. With an Orm Egg,” Marcia said.

“Which is utterly impossible,” Septimus said, “because there aren’t any. Anywhere.”

“And we don’t even have an Orm anymore.”

Septimus said nothing. Marcia linked her arm through his and they walked on in silence for a while, looking across to the lights in the old Infirmary, which now seemed threatening to Septimus, as if they too were encroaching upon all he loved and held dear.

On the roof of the East Gate Lookout Tower, headquarters of the Castle Message Rat Service, the two rats were still sitting out under the stars.

“Hey, Da,” Morris said, “there’s the new EOW down there, walking along the walls with the old one.”

“That’s nice, Morris,” Stanley murmured dozily. “I always thought she left him to take over too young. I’m glad she’s come back to lend a hand.”

Unwittingly, Marcia was at that moment echoing Stanley’s thoughts. “I sometimes feel I burdened you with all this far too young,” she was saying.

Sometimes Septimus felt that too. But what was done was done. “You went when you needed to,” he said.

“But not when *you* needed me to,” Marcia replied. “Septimus, I am sorry. I was so caught up in my own plans. But now, if you will allow me, we can fight this threat—this **UnRaveling**—shoulder to shoulder. I won’t leave you to face this alone.” She faltered. “Unless, of course, you would rather I did . . . I mean . . . I don’t want to intrude.”

Septimus felt as though a great weight had been lifted from him. “Thank you,” he said. “I would like that very much indeed . . . if we could do this together.” Septimus reached inside his tunic and from around his neck he lifted off a lapis amulet with the shape of a dragon incised into it. This was the Akhu Amulet, the symbol and source of much of his power as ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He cradled the amulet in his palm, gazing at the blue stone bound with gold, lying heavy with the weight of his **Magyk**. “We can’t lose our **Magyk**,” he said. “I couldn’t bear it if one day this crumbled to dust like Driffa’s ring.”

“We will not let that happen,” Marcia said. “I promise you, we will *not*. Now put that amulet back on, Septimus.” Septimus did as he was told. “Let’s go back now,” said Marcia. “We have work to do. Plans to make. **Magyk** to mend. *Together*.”

Septimus blinked a sudden blurriness from his eyes. “I’ve missed you,” he said.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll soon get fed up with me,” Marcia retorted, finding that her eyes had gone a little fuzzy too.

Morris watched the pair walk away arm in arm: one resplendent in the purple robes of the office of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, the other equally impressive in a long, flowing, multicolored cloak and purple pointy shoes

that caught the light as she walked. Then the rat looked across to the other side of the Moat at what really interested him—the party in the Infirmary.

“What is that awful noise?” the old rat in the basket chair grumbled.

“It’s the party, Da,” Morris said.

“Ghastly things, parties,” said the old rat. “My tummy’s cold.”

Morris, remarkably adroit with only one arm, tucked the rug around Stanley’s large stomach and looked longingly across the water. He watched the rowboats heading across the Moat, packed with people. He saw the steady stream of dark figures making their way to the Infirmary from both the Castle and the Forest. He heard the music and laughter grow loud every time the Infirmary door was opened, he saw the blazing lights of the candles, and he sighed. Morris didn’t often wish he were human, but tonight was one of those nights when he did. Humans knew how to have fun.





PART VII

A WORM TURNS

Marissa was looking good and she knew it. She wore a long purple cloak—just to get used to the idea of running the Wizzer, she told herself—and around her brown curly hair was Jenna’s gold circlet, which made her feel surprisingly regal. Tonight was going to be a blast; she knew it. There was good music, plenty of party potions and a great crowd of people. She was going to forget all about the bag of Kraan for the night. *Anyway, who needed bodyguards when you had so many friends?* Marissa thought, smiling at two handsome young fishermen who had just arrived on the night barge from the Port.

Marissa took her duties as hostess seriously. She stood in the entrance lobby, greeting the waves of new arrivals as they poured in—scribes, apprentices of all descriptions, the entire staff of the Grot and, best of all, the Knights of Knee, who always made a party go with a bang.

“Hey, Drammer,” Marissa said as Newt Makken and his younger brother arrived, “It’s way past your bedtime.”

Drammer grinned sheepishly and sloped off to find something more interesting than FizzFroot to drink. Newt encircled Marissa in a bad-breath bear hug. “Get off, Newt,” Marissa said, pushing him away.

Newt looked hurt. “Hey, I broke out of the Wizzer just for you. I’m not meant to be here, you know.”

“No one’s *meant* to be here, Newt,” Marissa drawled. “That’s the whole point. Now run away and play, why don’t you?”

Newt sulked off into the shadows.

The flow of guests had slowed to a few stragglers, and Marissa was casting her eyes over the throng, considering who looked the most interesting, when the door opened and Jo-Jo Heap walked in. Jo-Jo looked good. He wore his Gothyk Grotto black cloak with a certain swagger and had on a new, but artfully scuffed, leather jerkin. Apart from the usual party offering of a bottle, Jo-Jo was also carrying a tiny box wrapped in red paper tied with purple string, which he put into Marissa’s hand.

“Ooh, Jo-Jo, how sweet,” Marissa trilled. “I’ll open it later.” She turned to put it on a similar pile of offerings, but Jo-Jo grabbed her wrist.

“No. *Now*,” he told her. Jo-Jo had decided to try a new approach with Marissa and stop being so nice. To his surprise it seemed to work—obediently, Marissa unwrapped the gift to find a little box covered in green snakeskin.

Marissa had been expecting a love **Charm** of some description and was gleefully readying herself to hurl it straight out of the door. But when she opened the box she saw a tiny strip of what looked like thin black leather, forked at one end. She knew at once that was no love **Charm**. “What is it?” she asked.

“Snake tongue,” Jo-Jo said in his new terse mode. He grinned. “Reminded me of you.”

Marissa stared at Jo-Jo in shock. “Oh!” she said lamely.

What Jo-Jo didn’t say was that he had indeed been intending to give Marissa a love **Charm**. But in the **Charm** Library he had come across something that had suddenly felt absolutely right for Marissa. Jo-Jo had enough **Magyk** schooling to know that where **Charms** were concerned you listened to your heart, not your head. And so while Rose and Tod were closeted in the **Charm** Chamber, Jo-Jo had used the automatic checkout service and borrowed the snake tongue. He knew no one would check up on the loan until it became overdue in two weeks’ time. And by then, Jo-Jo thought, who knew what might have happened? For Jo-Jo, who was probably the most intuitive of all the Heap brothers, had a feeling that something big and possibly nasty was brewing in the Wizard Tower.

Marissa tentatively touched the snake tongue with the tip of a finger. “What does it do?” she whispered.

Jo-Jo shrugged. “Makes people believe whatever you say.”

“Wow!” Marissa breathed.

Jo-Jo grinned. “As long as you have it in your mouth.”

“Oh, *gross*,” said Marissa.

Sticking to his resolution, Jo-Jo said no more. He threw his cloak over his shoulder, showing its new deep blue—and rather expensive—silk lining, walked haughtily past Marissa and disappeared in search of the piper. Jo-Jo had made a flute and he wanted to mark where the holes went.

Marissa stared after Jo-Jo in stunned amazement. The evening was not turning out quite how she had expected.

But that was only the start of it.

SKITTLES

Marcia and Septimus had retreated to the Pyramid Library—the only place in Septimus’s rooms where Milo’s snores did not reach. They were sitting together at the main desk. In front of them, illuminated by a trio of brightly burning candles, lay a small, tatty book titled *Orm Fancier’s Factoids* by Francis Fa Oom. The book was handwritten, the paper was fragile, and the writing looped untidily across the page. It was not an easy read. Marcia peered at it through her spectacles, Septimus through his **Enlarging Glass**. They were looking at the very last chapter, called “Orm Egg Distribution and Frequency.”

“So . . .” murmured Marcia, running her finger along the closely written lines, “basically, Oom says that Orm eggs were always as rare as hens’ teeth and virtually impossible to find as they were trapped deep within the bedrock. Apparently a group of sorcerers—of whom he does not approve—spent hundreds of years harvesting them. He reckons there is not even one left.” Marcia took off her spectacles and rubbed her eyes wearily. “Driffa was right.”

Septimus nodded. “According to Fa Oom.”

Marcia smiled. “What a silly name. Can you imagine what his Apprentices called him?”

Septimus chuckled. Marcia made even the worst of situations feel better. He leaned back in his chair and allowed his gaze to travel around the Pyramid Library. He loved its atmosphere at this time of night. In his last year as Marcia’s Apprentice, Septimus had often worked through the night at this very desk. He would breathe in the smell of the old books, secret papers and pamphlets, and emerge in the early hours of the morning heady with Ancient **Magyk**. Septimus hoped that in a few years time Tod would be doing the same, exploring the most **Magykal** Library in the world. But if what Driffa had said was true, there would be no library left for Tod to

explore, because there would be no Wizard Tower. There would be nothing left but a cloud of dust. Wearily, Septimus closed *Orm Fancier's Factoids* and blew out the candles. Then he and Marcia went quietly down the stone steps to their beds.

Neither slept well. Marcia, sleeping in Septimus's old room, had a recurring dream that she was dropping giant blue eggs out of Septimus's window and knocking down Wizard-shaped skittles in the courtyard far below. Septimus fared no better. He dreamed he was rowing across the Moat to the Infirmary party. The water had turned to treacle and there were shark-finned Kraan swimming in it, trying to saw his boat in half. The sawing noise sounding remarkably like Milo's snores.

PARTY BAG

Marissa was losing control of the party. It had begun with a rampage led by Drammer, which had quickly degenerated into a food fight in the corridor. Now there was a full-blown brawl going on in the middle of the ward and already Marissa had heard the sound of breaking glass. To the accompaniment of the ever-increasing beat of the tambours and the wailing of Forest pipes by three excited musicians who were stirring it up, Marissa pushed her way through the throng, her passage helped by well-placed kicks and vicious elbow jabs. "Hey, guys!" she yelled at the top of her voice. "Break it up! Break it up!"

Her answer was the crash of the nurses' desk being overturned and the shriek of one of the Knights of Knee, upon whose foot it had landed. Marissa waded in. She pulled Newt Makken off a small Port apprentice, whom he appeared to be strangling, and threw the brawlers apart, yelling, "*Stoppit, will you?*" But the brawl was acting like a magnet. Anyone with a score to settle was throwing themselves into the fight with enthusiasm, landing their blows at first where they intended and then wherever else they could. Marissa was trying to separate Drammer and a chef from Wizard Sandwiches—both trading wide, swinging punches—when she became aware that someone had taken charge and things were calming down; people were helping others to their feet and slinking sheepishly away.

Marissa sent Drammer off with a shove and turned to see who the referee was.

“Jo-Jo!” she gasped.

Jo-Jo was pulling a pile of crestfallen Port apprentices to their feet. “You come to a Castle party,” he was telling them, “and you stick to Castle rules. If you want to stay, you behave. Got that?”

A mixture of nods and groans was the reply.

“I knew there was going to be trouble as soon as I saw the Portsmen come in,” he growled.

“Port who?” asked Marissa faintly. She felt quite overwhelmed, although she wasn’t sure why.

“Portsmen. A gang of apprentices from the Port. The Knights of Knee went down there last summer and trashed their boat. I suppose this was a return match.”

“The cheek of it!” Marissa said indignantly. She was feeling back on form now that order had returned. Marissa was not good with chaos; she liked to be in control.

“Could have told you this would happen,” Jo-Jo said gruffly. “Should have had security on the door.”

“Security?”

“Yeah. Security.” True to his new persona, Jo-Jo did not elaborate. Thinking it was best to walk away while he was winning, he turned to go. Jo-Jo had spent the whole afternoon rehearsing how to walk away from Marissa, but as he performed his nonchalant turn, the floor moved from under his feet and the next moment he was lying on his back staring up at Marissa’s shocked face. He waited for her to break into a cascade of giggles, but to his surprise she didn’t.

“Jo-Jo!” Marissa dropped to her knees beside him—then screamed and leaped to her feet. “Ouch-ouch-ouch! That *hurt*.”

Jo-Jo got up carefully. “Some idiot’s put ball bearings on the floor,” he said. “That’s fighting dirty.” He picked up one of the offending objects and held it out to Marissa. “Nasty thing. It’s got a lot of **Darke** on it.”

“Oh dear,” Marissa said with studied innocence. “Can I see?”

Jo-Jo held out his hand. In the dip of his palm was what Marissa feared: a red Kraan bead. She swore under her breath.

“Yeah,” Jo-Jo agreed. “Not nice. I’ll chuck it in the Moat. Are they all like that? I’ll chuck them in too.”

Very slowly, all the while trying to think how she was going to get the beads back without raising Jo-Jo’s suspicions, Marissa helped gather the Kraan beads together. It was not difficult. Although they had rolled far and wide across the floor, they shone like little red eyes in the candlelight and were easy to spot. Soon other party guests joined in, and to Marissa’s discomfort, it rapidly turned into a game they had all played as children: Hunt the Bug.

Minutes later both Jo-Jo and Marissa had a handful of nasty little red eyes staring up at them. Drammer, who was trying to get back into favor, helped to right the nurses’ desk and found beneath it the little black leather bag with three beads still inside. Looking very pleased with himself, he handed it to Marissa, saying, “There’s your necklace bag.”

“Thanks.” Marissa snatched the bag and began to shovel in her stash of Kraan beads. As soon as she finished, Jo-Jo—without saying a word—reached over and took the bag. He was intending merely to add his own haul of beads but as he opened the drawstring to its full extent he saw a rolled up piece of paper tied with a black silk thread. Jo-Jo knew an **Incantation** when he saw one. Holding the offending scrap of paper between finger and thumb, he held it up, frowning at Marissa. “Where did you get this?” he asked coldly.

Marissa faltered, shocked by the disapproval in Jo-Jo’s voice. In that brief moment of hesitation, Newt Makken—who for lack of anything better to do had come to harass his little brother—snatched the **Incantation** from Jo-Jo’s grasp.

“Makken! Give that back!” Jo-Jo yelled, swinging around to grab it.

Newt ducked under Jo-Jo’s arm and in a lightning-quick movement he grabbed the bag of Kraan beads too.

“Give it back!” Marissa screamed.

“Scumbag!” Jo-Jo added for good measure.

“Come and get it, Heap boy!” Newt yelled, taking off down the ward, swinging the little bag of beads around his head.

Marissa grabbed Jo-Jo. “Please. *Get them back.*” The alarm in Marissa’s eyes sent Jo-Jo after Newt like a rocket. Whatever these beads were, Jo-Jo suspected that Newt was the very worst person to have them.

The partygoers decided to treat the chase as entertainment. The Forest pipes stopped wailing as the piper began to shout for his man: Jo-Jo Heap. However, the tambour players were all for Newt and began a chant to that effect. Soon rival chants filled the Infirmary: “Newt! Newt!” “Heap! Heap!” as the chase hurtled through the two long wards, leaving a trail of overturned chairs, tables and the occasional bed in its wake.

Jo-Jo cornered Newt at the end of the ward. Newt leaped onto a bed and jumped up and down like a demented three-year-old, waving the bag of Kraan above his head. “Come and get them, Heap boy! Come and get them!” he yelled.

Jo-Jo Heap accepted the invitation.

RUNNING AWAY

Septimus woke just after dawn with the sudden certainty that it was too dangerous for Tod to use the Ways. He leaped out of bed, threw a cloak over his pajamas and hurried down the stone steps to the big room with the purple sofa. He found Milo quietly tending the fire, feeding it small twigs as though it were a hungry pet. Milo looked up. “The boss is still asleep,” he said.

Septimus nodded. They both knew that Marcia was still the boss.

“Cup of coffee?” Milo asked.

“When I get back. Won’t be long.” With that Septimus hurried out.

Two minutes later, Boris Catchpole, doorkeeper, was wondering what was wrong. It wasn’t every day you saw the EOW in his pajamas.

“Catchpole!” Septimus said.

“Yes?” Catchpole tried not to bristle. It rankled that someone over whom he once had power of life and death was now able to address him by his surname with impunity.

“My Apprentice will be leaving soon. Will you tell her I wish to see her before she goes, please?” And then, remembering that Tod did not always take notice of Catchpole’s door instructions, he began to scribble a note.

“She’s already gone,” Catchpole said. “Shall I tell her when she gets back?”

“She’s *gone*?”

Catchpole made a point of getting back at Septimus in little ways. Tod had actually only left a few minutes beforehand, but Catchpole saw no reason to be entirely accurate. “She left ages ago. With her backpack.” With some satisfaction, he saw Septimus’s expression of dismay. “Running away, was she?” Catchpole asked. “I always thought she was trouble, that one. No manners at all.”

“Of course she wasn’t running away,” Septimus snapped back. “And you will keep your opinions to yourself, Catchpole, thank you very much.” He turned on his heel and strode away to the stairs.

Tod however, was still in the courtyard. She was enjoying watching the early-morning **Sprites** dropping slowly to the ground and trying to catch one for luck. They all eluded her and after some minutes she gave up, stepped into the **Hidden** arch and began her journey.

On the other side of the silver doors, Catchpole watched the swirl of purple as it ascended. He could not resist a smirk. Of course the kid was running away. And good riddance too, he thought.

But on the far side of the Moat, Jo-Jo Heap was running away for real.

RAT’S-EYE VIEW

On the East Gate Lookout Tower, Morris was sitting on the battlements, contentedly swinging his little legs, while he listened to the clanking of the drawbridge being lowered, telling him that his night shift was over.

After Stanley had retired to bed, Morris had stayed up all night on emergency message duty and had enjoyed every minute of it. He had jigged and twirled to the wild music of the Forest pipes wailing across the water and stamped his little rat feet in perfect time to the drumming of the tambours. No one had rung the night bell with a message—or, to be more accurate, Morris hadn’t actually *heard* anyone ring the night bell.

Now, the night was over, the party had gone very quiet, and the sky above the Forest was pale yellow. Morris began to think about breakfast.

Suddenly there was an enormous *BANG* from inside the Infirmary. It was such a shock that Morris very nearly lost his balance and fell. He grabbed on to the battlements with his one remaining arm and rolled safely backward, onto the roof. When he got to his feet he could not believe what he saw. The entire end wall of the Infirmary had been blown into splinters, and lurching out through the gaping hole was a line of huge, black, beast-headed skeletons, each with six glittering red eyes. Morris instinctively ducked down. And then, unable to resist, he peered back up again, his eyes wide with alarm.

Morris was a well-read rat. While delivering a message to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard he had lost his arm in an attack by a Garmin. During his time recovering as an honored guest in the Wizard Tower Sick Bay, Morris had made it his business to read about every **Darke** creature possible. Should he ever come face-to-face with one in the future, Morris wanted to know exactly what he was dealing with. And so, as the rat stared in dismay out over the battlements, he knew exactly what he was looking at: Kraan. He remembered them well because they had, the book had gleefully informed its readers, a predilection for tearing rats to pieces. Morris also remembered that the Kraan had a particular dislike for the Wizards—the younger ones particularly annoyed them—and homed in on their green eyes. One touch of a Kraan was lethal; it sent a powerful shock through the body and killed instantly.

His little mouth agape with horror, Morris stared at the stream of Kraan emerging from the Infirmary. It seemed endless, flowing out like a tide of treacle. Morris knew what that was too. He remembered the instructions in the book: *One Kraan may be Engendered from six red beads, which become the eyes. Please Note: Care must be taken to keep these beads in separate groups of six to avoid a Chain Reaction.*

The Kraan walked with an awkward gait, swinging to and fro like pendulums, kicking each leg out in front as though they were aiming for an invisible football. They would have been funny had it not been for their frightening, beastlike skulls and the glittering stare of their tiny red eyes—all six of them, lined up three on either side of the snout.

As the Kraan kept on coming, Morris saw people pouring out from the Infirmary. Like ants running from a destroyed nest they came scrambling from the windows, throwing themselves out of the doors and then scattering

in all directions. Some went racing for the Forest, others tore along the bank toward the safety of the heights of Raven's Rock, or in the opposite direction to the One Way Bridge and the safety of the Farmlands beyond—anywhere but where the Kraan were now clearly headed: the North Gate drawbridge and, beyond it, the Castle.

Suddenly Morris saw a lone figure in a short black cloak come running from the newly lowered drawbridge and head back *toward* the Kraan. Morris stared, aghast. It was Jo-Jo Heap, but what was he doing? If he carried on like that, Morris thought, very soon there were going to be only six Heap brothers. Morris began to chew his little rat claws. This was scary. And sad. Morris liked Jo-Jo Heap.

DOWN AND UP AGAIN

As Jo-Jo fled from the mayhem that Newt Makken had let loose, the first rays of the rising sun were breaking through the treetops and the Bridge Boy was lowering the Castle drawbridge. As the edge of the bridge touched its resting plate, Jo-Jo leaped onto it and hurtled across.

The thudding of boots echoing on the planks drew Gringe out of his cubbyhole to take the first toll of the day, only to be confronted by a wild-eyed, terrified Heap. Gringe wasn't sure which one it was; they all looked the same to him. The Heap wasn't wearing purple so that narrowed it down a bit, but not much. Suddenly the Heap grabbed hold of him.

"Hey, get off!" Gringe growled.

"Gringe!" Jo-Jo gasped. "You have to raise the bridge. Now!"

Gringe was feeling rather sensitive about Heaps telling him what to do with his bridge. "Not until sunset, I don't," he snarled. "Now push off, will you?"

"Look, Gringe! *Look!*" Jo-Jo wheeled around and pointed back the way he had come. "You *have* to raise the bridge!"

Gringe sighed. *Nothing changes*, he thought. *Heaps were always trouble and they always will be*. Warily he put on the long-distance spectacles that Mrs. Gringe had forced him to buy after he had begun to raise the bridge while Sarah Heap was still standing on it. The spectacles settled onto his

broad, red nose, and the rest of Gringe's face turned ashen. "What the . . ." he gasped.

Gringe's spectacles revealed that a whole wall of the old Infirmary was missing. And marching toward Gringe's precious bridge was a dark stream of terror with a myriad of beady red eyes all, it seemed, focused on *him*.

"Raise the bridge, Gringe," Jo-Jo was gabbling. "Protect the Castle! Now!"

Gringe found himself unable to speak: his tongue had stuck itself to the roof of his mouth. He gave an inappropriate thumbs-up and watched Jo-Jo run back across the bridge, jump off and turn around, yelling, "Up! Up!"

Gringe ran to the lifting gear, yelling all the while for the Bridge Boy, who had just gone inside for his breakfast. In the absence of any response, Gringe began to raise the bridge. The noise brought Mrs. Gringe out to see what was happening. Seconds later there were three people turning the huge wheels that raised the bridge. It had never gone up so fast.

On the other side of the bank, Jo-Jo resolutely turned his back to the Castle and stood watching the advancing Kraan. He knew what he had to do—if he was brave enough to do it. *Come on, Jo-Jo*, he told himself. *Compared to Marissa, these Kraan are a piece of cake.*

OUT OF THE BAG

Septimus, Marcia and Milo were drinking coffee beside the fire and eating Septimus's special eggy-toast when the door to his rooms sprang open with a crash. In the doorway stood Jo-Jo Heap: wild-eyed, shaking, soaked and covered with mud. Marcia and Septimus jumped from their seats and rushed over to Jo-Jo. Milo continued to eat his toast—he'd seen worse at sea.

Ten minutes later, fortified with coffee, his shivering slowed by the fire and three blankets, Jo-Jo began his story. He spoke slowly, as though he did not quite understand what had happened—or how.

"It was Newt's fault . . . he took Marissa's bag of beads . . . there was an **Incantation** in them . . . **Darke** stuff . . . I chased him and he swung himself up onto one of the ceiling beams . . . sat there like a ship's monkey

in the rigging grinning at us . . . jiggling the bag up and down . . . Marissa was screaming for him to give it back . . . I was trying to get up there after him and . . . everyone was laughing and making monkey noises.” Jo-Jo paused and took a gulp of coffee. “Marissa was begging me to be careful . . . telling everyone to be quiet. Though she didn’t put it quite as politely as that.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” Septimus said.

“She was terrified because . . .” Jo-Jo hesitated for a few seconds, took a deep breath and said, “Because the bag was full of Kraan beads.”

Septimus and Marcia looked horrified. “*Kraan?*” they repeated.

Jo-Jo nodded. “Kraan. And Newt Makken **Engendered** them.”

Once again Septimus and Marcia both spoke together. “Newt Makken did *what?*”

“Um. He **Engendered** a bag of Kraan.”

“A *bag* of Kraan,” Marcia whispered.

Milo was finally paying attention. “What,” he whispered to Marcia, “are Kraan?”

Marcia shook her head, unable to speak.

“I take it they are not fluffy little kittens?” Milo commented to Jo-Jo.

“No, not really,” Jo-Jo said.

“So . . . how many were in this bag?” Septimus asked slowly.

“Tons,” said Jo-Jo.

“So how many Kraan?” asked Marcia.

Jo-Jo shuddered. “Dunno. I lost count.”

Septimus began to pace the room, muttering under his breath. “Where did that wretched witch get a whole bag of Kraan from?” he demanded angrily.

Jo-Jo looked warily at Septimus. He had never seen him like this. Septimus’s eyes flashed with anger; even the purple on his robes seem to glow with energy. For the first time ever, Jo-Jo Heap understood the power his younger brother possessed.

“I don’t know where she got them,” Jo-Jo said. “I didn’t even know what they were. I did my best to stop this. Really I did.”

Septimus sat down beside Jo-Jo. “I apologize, Jo-Jo. I realize that you are not responsible for this and that you didn’t have to come and tell us. But I do need to know a few things.”

“Anything. Ask me *anything*.”

“Did Newt say one **Engender** for each Kraan?” Septimus asked.

“No. He read it once. He was laughing, like he was reading a joke out of a cracker. And the more Marissa begged him to stop, the louder he said it.”

“So he said it to the *whole bag*?”

“Yep.” Jo-Jo nodded.

“A **Chain Reaction**,” Marcia muttered.

“Explosion, more like,” Jo-Jo said. “It just went kind of . . . *wherrr-oomph!* Very loud but soft too. Weird.” He shuddered. “Everything went black and filled up with choking **Darke** stuff. People were screaming and panicking . . . It was awful. I couldn’t breathe. I pulled Marissa out with me. But then she ran off. Into the Forest. I don’t know what happened to Newt . . .”

Marcia and Septimus exchanged somber glances. “It all depends,” Marcia said, “on whether Newt let go of the bag in time.”

“And closed his eyes,” added Septimus. “Green is not a good eye color to have when you’re standing next to a Kraan.”

“Jeez,” Jo-Jo said. “Newt’s a pain, but even so . . .”

“We’ll go over later and check,” Septimus said. “But first things first. Where are the Kraan now?”

“In the Moat,” Jo-Jo replied.

“In the *Moat*?”

Relieved at having got the bad news over with, Jo-Jo was beginning to feel a little better. Now he could begin on the slightly less bad news. Maybe, he thought, it was even good news. And so Jo-Jo told how he had made Gringe raise the bridge to protect the Castle and then lured the Kraan into the Moat. He had hoped that maybe they might drown, but anything was better than letting them loose to wander the Forest or Castle. Jo-Jo told how he had hidden under the water, using his unpierced flute as a breathing tube, and by the time he came to the end of his story, Jo-Jo was aware that Milo, Marcia and Septimus were looking at him with a new respect. Jo-Jo felt relieved. For once in his life he seemed to have done something right.

Septimus broke into a smile. “I don’t know what impresses me more,” he said. “Luring a **Chain** of Kraan into the Moat or getting Gringe to raise that drawbridge.”

THE RAT'S TALE

Leaving Jo-Jo to sleep off his ordeal, Septimus and Marcia set off in search of the Kraan. They talked to Gringe, but he was still too shaken to make any sense, so they decided to walk the walls of the Castle, peering down into the murky depths of the water as they went.

“Do you really think they drowned?” Septimus said.

“It was a brave thing for Jo-Jo to do,” Marcia said, “but unfortunately it won’t have drowned them. Kraan can exist quite happily underwater. However, it has probably got them far away from the Castle.” Marcia sighed. “But not in a way I would have chosen.”

“How do you mean?” Septimus asked.

“Septimus, as custodian of an Ancient Way Hub, I’ve made it my business to discover all I possibly can about the Ancient Ways. They were once infested with Kraan until some enterprising sorcerer made it his life’s work to rid the Ways of them. But being a sorcerer he was loath to lose such powerful beasts . . .”

“So he kept them,” Septimus finished for her.

“Indeed he did. He **Enchanted** their eyes and put them in a bag.”

“What an idiot,” Septimus muttered.

“I would agree with you on that,” Marcia said. “And the problem is that Kraan have an affinity for the Ancient Ways, and I fear that is where they will be heading. And that is the last thing we want in the Ways right now; their **Darke** presence will speed up the **UnRaveling** tremendously. Let’s hope they haven’t gotten in.”

“Tod’s in the Ways. Right now,” Septimus said quietly. “She’s going home.”

Marcia remembered how she had persuaded Septimus to let Tod go and felt awful. “Oh, Septimus . . .”

They walked on in silence until they came to the East Gate Lookout Tower. “The rats might have seen something,” Septimus suggested.

They rang the bell and waited. A young rat called Florence opened the door. She stared up at the impressive visitors towering over her. Florence was a sensitive rat and she could tell that something was wrong. “Good morning, ExtraOrdinaries,” she said. “How may I help you?”

“We are looking for witnesses to the, er, explosion at the old Infirmary,” Marcia said. “We wondered if anyone here saw anything?”

“Morris,” Florence said. “He saw it. Shall I go and fetch him?”

“That would be most kind,” Marcia said.

Morris was very relieved to talk. Stanley had been dismissive. “Night terrors,” he had told Morris over his breakfast egg. “You’ve had them ever since that Garmin trouble. Pass the salt, will you?” Morris had felt foolish and said nothing more. But now here he was up on the roof, with *two* top Castle dignitaries hanging on his every word, while Stanley, who was a nosy rat, gaped open-mouthed. It should have been a good feeling—but it wasn’t. Morris had something awful to tell one of them. “It was your brother, ExtraOrdinary. It was Jo-Jo, I’m sure it was,” Morris said.

“It was,” Septimus said.

“He was so brave,” Morris said. “There was a line of Kraan heading toward the Castle and he came dancing out in front of them trying to make them follow him. He was like the Pied Piper—he even had a flute in his hand—and he waved his arms and they *all* followed him to the Moat, and then Jo-Jo jumped into the water and . . .” Morris looked up at Septimus sadly. “And, that was it. I watched for ages but he didn’t come back up. I’m so sorry,” he said, his thin, high rat voice trying not to wobble.

“Morris, please don’t be upset. Jo-Jo is alive and well,” Septimus said.

“Oh, that is wonderful news!” Morris said. “I was so sure he had . . .”

“Could you please tell us what happened next?” Marcia prompted gently.

“Oh, yes . . . sorry. Well, after I stopped watching for Jo-Jo I felt really sad and I leaned over the battlements and just stared down at the Moat. And then I noticed lots of little whirlpools going along the surface, all in a line and heading that way . . .” Morris pointed to the left, down toward Snake Slipway. “I just *knew* they were from the Kraan walking along the bottom of the Moat,” he said.

“I am sure you were right,” said Septimus.

“You didn’t see them leave the Moat?” Marcia asked.

Morris shook his head. “No. I watched the whirlpools all the way around the bend until I couldn’t see them anymore.”

“Thank you, Morris,” Septimus said. “We really are very grateful. You’ve been extremely helpful.”

Morris showed his visitors out. As they went he could not help but ask, “Um, do you think they might come up here at all? I know that Kraan like killing us rats. And we are right by the Moat . . .”

“I think you are perfectly safe,” Septimus said. “But if you are at all worried, you have my permission to ring the emergency button for the Wizard Tower. Someone will be with you straightaway.”

Relief flooded Morris’s features. “Oh, thank you so much,” he said.

Septimus and Marcia hurried away. “That is one intelligent and thoughtful rat,” Marcia said.

“And a brave one too,” Septimus said. “We have some very good rats in this Castle.”

“So let’s keep it that way,” said Marcia.

As they made their way to Snake Slipway, Marcia and Septimus breathlessly discussed strategy, finishing each other’s sentences like a long-married couple.

“They’ll be making for the **Hidden** arch on the Outside Path, I reckon . . .”

“Definitely . . .”

“We might be in time . . .”

“With any luck. It’s slow going through the mud on the bottom of the Moat.”

“If we get there before the last one, we’ll need a . . .”

“Strategy.”

“A good one.”

“A single entity from a **Chain** carries the power of the whole **Chain** . . .”

“Well remembered. We act together . . .”

“**Synchrony** . . .”

“Exactly. Remember how?”

Septimus grinned. “It was our very last tutorial. How could I forget?”

Marcia held out her hands as though accepting a gift. “**Synchronized Transport?**”

In reply, Septimus placed his hands in Marcia’s. “And if we get a Kraan?”

“**Chain Break** first. Can’t deal with more than one.”

“Quite. Then **Fast Freeze?**”

“**Fast Freeze** and **Safe Shield** combo . . .”

“You’ve got it. Okay, let’s go.”

Morris was the only one in the Castle to see the rare sight of a **Synchronized Transport**. Being a nosy rat, just like his father, Morris had rather sheepishly followed the two ExtraOrdinaries. He watched as Septimus and Marcia became encased in a haze of purple mist and when the **Synchronicity** kicked in with a burst of blindingly bright light, Morris squealed with shock and hid his eyes. When he opened his eyes he thought Septimus and Marcia were still there, although they were now a shimmering green color. But when Morris blinked and looked up at the sky he saw them there, too. And when he looked down at his feet there they were as well. The afterimage took hours to fade, and when it finally went, Morris rather missed seeing the two green Wizards hanging around the Rat Office.

SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING

The **Synchronized Transport** took Marcia and Septimus to exactly where they had planned—the **Hidden** arch. It was to be found in the Castle wall, along the Outside Path, some twenty feet above the Moat. They arrived to find the path slippery with Moat mud and strands of wet weed dripping on the wall. There was no doubt that the Kraan had recently passed that way, but of them there was no sign.

“We’re too late,” Septimus said.

The path was little more than a ledge. Marcia shuffled around carefully and stared at the wall, trying to see the **Hidden** arch within, but all she saw was the remains of a chalk mark drawn by Lucy Heap some months earlier. Tentatively, Marcia pushed her hand against the stone and felt a softness to it. “It’s still open,” she said. “We’ll have to go after them, Septimus. For Tod’s sake.”

“We’ll go **Synchronized**,” Septimus said. He stretched out his hand to take Marcia’s once more, and as he did there was a soft splash from the Moat below. They both gingerly leaned out and looked down to see a black, bony skull breaking the surface.

“We’ve got one . . .” breathed Marcia.

Never had the advent of a Kraan been greeted with such pleasure. Utterly still, Marcia and Septimus watched the beast claw its way up the wall, like a giant spider climbing out of the bath.

Synchronicity is a **Magyk** state where two Wizards with equal power and knowledge act together as one. This can, if used well, increase the combined strength of their **Magyk** by up to seven times.

The Kraan looked up and saw two green-eyed humans staring down at it. Its six red eyes lit up with delight at the prospect of a double Wizard kill so early in its existence. It leaped forward for the lethal blow and found itself suddenly surrounded by a purple mist. An overpowering weakness enveloped the Kraan and it fell, limbs flailing, a spider out of control. There was a splash and it began to sink.

“Bother,” said Marcia. “We’ll have to . . .”

“Jump,” Septimus finished.

They landed beside the Kraan, which was sinking, slowed by its encasing purple bubble. Marcia grabbed an arm, feeling only a slight tingle as she touched the slimy bone, and Septimus found a leg. Stupefied by the **Magyk**, the Kraan did nothing, but Marcia and Septimus were struggling. Their heavy, waterlogged cloaks were pulling them down, the fight to stay afloat was using up much of their power, and direct contact with the Kraan was leaching their **Magyk** away fast.

Rupert Gringe, Lucy Heap’s brother, was the proprietor of Rupert’s Paddleboat Hire at the end of Snake Slipway. He was embarking on his annual clear-out of junk when he heard splashing from just around the bend in the Moat. Rupert knew the sound of someone in trouble; he grabbed the nearest boat and set off. The sight of Rupert’s pink paddleboat tearing toward them, paddles whirling furiously, was all Septimus and Marcia needed to give them the energy to keep their **Synchronicity** going.

Rupert drew up beside them. “Bit cold for a swim, isn’t it?” he said, regarding Marcia and Septimus with amusement.

“Very funny, Rupert . . . give us a hand to get this . . . into the boat, will you?” Septimus said, breathless with the effort of keeping afloat.

“Get what in?” Suddenly Rupert’s grin vanished. “What the . . . what is *that*?” he whispered, pointing to the purple-shrouded Kraan bobbing just beneath the surface.

“It won’t hurt you,” Marcia said. “It’s **Shielded**.”

“I’m not having that thing in my boat,” Rupert told them. “No way. I just painted it for the season.”

“Then . . . tow it,” Septimus puffed. “Please, Rupert. It’s important.”

“All right,” Rupert agreed reluctantly. “Now, do you two want to get in or are you still enjoying your swim?”

There was only one answer to that. Rupert put the ladder down and soon his pink paddleboat was full of two dripping Wizards and the strangeness of **Magyk**.

Under instructions, Rupert took them to the Manuscriptorium landing stage at the end of Sled Alley. As they paddled along the Moat towing the Kraan encased in its purple bubble, they passed the wreckage of the old Infirmary. “That was some party last night,” Rupert commented. He received no reply. Both Septimus and Marcia were tiring fast and they needed all their concentration to keep hold of the Kraan and remain in **Synchronicity**.

At the landing stage Septimus managed two words to Rupert: “*Don’t touch.*” Rupert needed no telling. He stood back while Marcia and Septimus heaved the Kraan from the water and the enormity of the thing revealed itself. Then he watched the two Wizards carry it up the alley, enfolded in its purple caul. Rupert paddled slowly home in the sunshine, feeling unsettled. What, he wondered, was going on?

At the Wizard Tower a terrified Catchpole barricaded himself into the porter’s lodge. Septimus put the Tower into **LockDown** to protect the more sensitive areas and then he and Marcia embarked upon the tricky task of maneuvering the Kraan up the spiral stairs. At last they reached the **Darke** eighteenth floor. They staggered along the corridor, hauling the unwieldy creature toward the **Safe Chamber**: a small **Darke**-proofed room with a highly effective **Lock**.

With one hand, Septimus managed to **UnLock** the **Chamber**. He pushed the door ajar and then stopped. “There’s someone in here,” he whispered.

“Who on earth would want to—” Marcia’s comment was cut off by a quavering voice.

“Don’t come in. Please don’t. I’m contaminated. Keep clear.”

“Newt?” Septimus said. “Is that you?”

“Yes . . . it’s me. I’m so sorry, ExtraOrdinary. I’ve done a terrible thing.”

“We know what you’ve done, Newt,” Septimus told him curtly. “Come out of there and keep away from us. You’ll see why.”

Newt’s pale, scared face appeared from the gloom. His eyes widened with shock at the sight of the shadowy form of the Kraan within a purple haze. He flattened himself against the doorframe and squeezed by. Then he stood, chewing his fingernails, watching Marcia and Septimus deposit the Kraan in the **Safe Chamber**.

At last, with the door **Locked**, Marcia and Septimus let go of their **Synchronicity**. Newt now saw clearly the bedraggled state the two Wizards were in. He was shocked.

“Newt Makken,” Septimus said, “I suggest you stop gawking like a stranded fish and start to do something useful.”

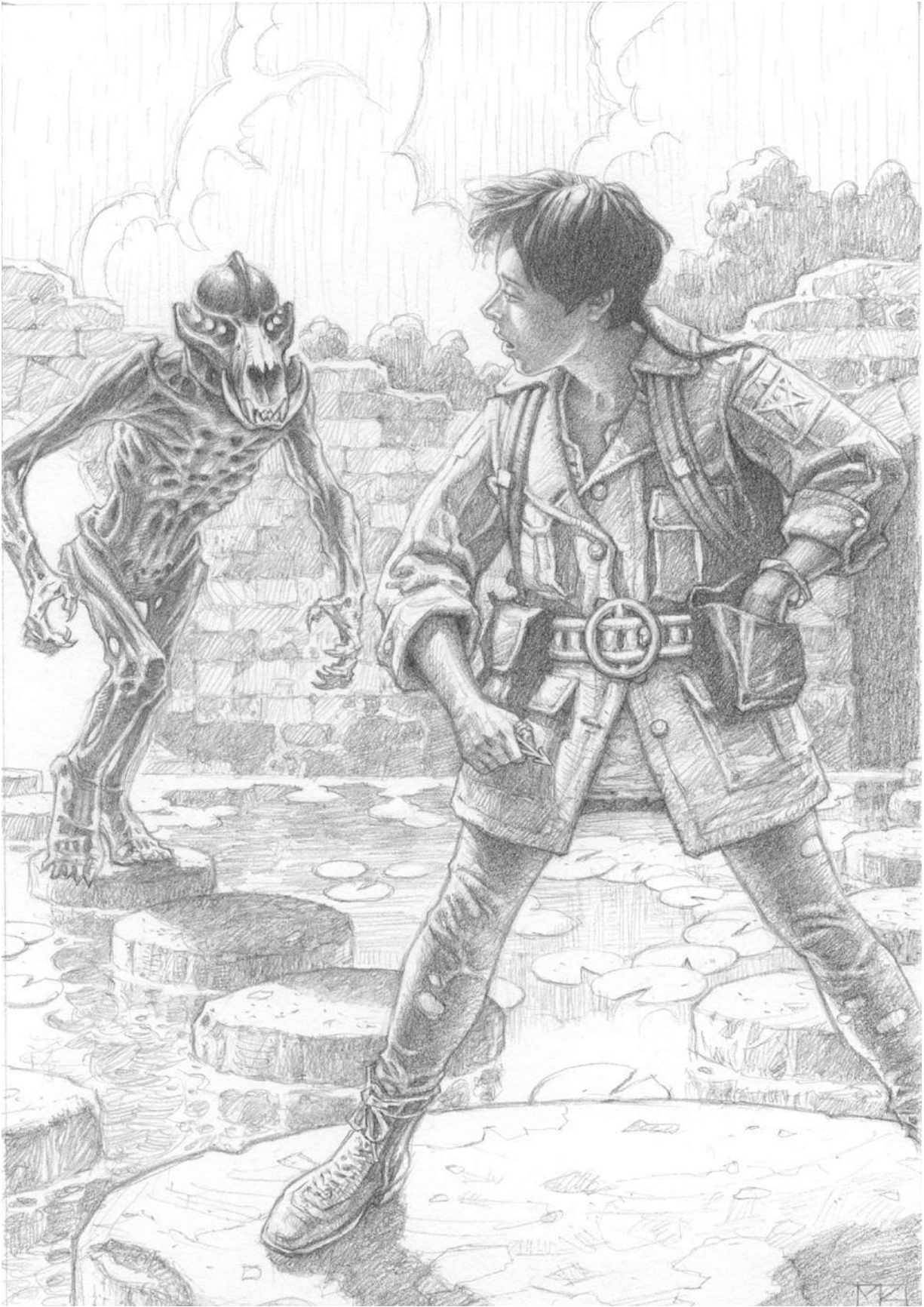
“Yes. Anything. I’ll do anything you want,” Newt said.

Septimus left Newt in the **Darke** book room with a pen and paper. “You can write out the **Incantation** you so cleverly managed to say right the first time,” Septimus told him.

Septimus released the Wizard Tower from its **LockDown** and he and Marcia went up to his rooms. While they changed into dry clothes Milo made them coffee. He knew better than to ask what had happened; Marcia would tell him when she was ready.

Milo saw no more of Marcia that day or for much of the next. She and Septimus, along with the chastened Newt, worked tirelessly to find the **Reverse** of the Kraan **Incantation**. They had custody of one **Link** from the **Chain Reaction**, and whatever happened to that **Link** would happen to the entire **Chain**. Now all they had to do was to find the **Reverse** of the **Incantation** and apply it to their captive.

But first they had to find it.



PART VIII

A NEAR MISS

Tod's *PathFinder* was a beautiful thing. It consisted of two parts: a smooth onyx sphere attached to a leather triangle that she held between finger and thumb and a hollow lapis lazuli dome attached to a beautiful pointer of filigreed silver shaped like a long triangle. On the opposite side of the lapis dome was a thick curl of silver through which Tod threaded a leather cord so that when she was not using it, the **PathFinder** hung around her neck like a pendant. The two parts fit together beautifully: the lapis dome sat snugly on the onyx sphere and moved fluidly to point in the right direction. All Tod had to do was to touch the tip of the pointer to a piece of rock from the place she wanted to go, then the **PathFinder** would guide her through the Hubs, showing the archways she needed to take.

The Ancient Ways consisted of a network of strange and **Magykal** tunnels linked to a worldwide system of Hubs. Each Hub had twelve tunnels leading from it, marked with the old *PathFinder* numbering system from I to XII. Tod had to negotiate nine Hubs in order to get home because two on her way home were unusable. One was full of lava from a volcanic eruption and the other, the nearest to her village, was now beneath the sea. And so she had to travel great distances across the world in order to arrive at a place not so very far from where she had started. But this was no hardship; Tod loved the Ways and even going through nine Hubs would only take about an hour—if all went well.

All did go well to begin with.

Marcia's Keep was the first Hub. Tod hurried across and headed into Arch II. She walked toward the white mist of the **Vanishing Point**—and then she was gone.

A few minutes later, Tod was stepping into one of her favorite Hubs. It felt like a tiny, wild wood. Its twelve arches were set into an enclosing wall built from mellow brick festooned with ivy. The Hub was suffused with a soft green light; it was calm and peaceful. Birds sang brightly and this time Tod was entranced to see a sea of wild roses tumbling over the walls. Had

she not been so excited about going home she would have been tempted to sit among the roses for a while and listen to the birdsong. But with the happy thought of surprising her father when he came back from his day's fishing, Tod followed the direction her **PathFinder** was pointing and walked into the next arch.

Tod ticked the subsequent Hubs off as they appeared in their usual sequence.

Hub three: an ancient, bare arena of white marble, glaring in the heat of the sun.

Hub four: a muddy pool, ankle-deep, writhing with tadpoles.

Hub five: a slate quarry, glittering with frost, with the arches hewn into the rock.

Hub six: inside a house, with swinging wooden doors on the arches. There was a baby crying in the room above.

Hub seven: a hushed temple and its priest. Tod had a coin ready in her pocket in case the priest noticed her as she ran across the bright mosaic floor. But the old man was asleep and Tod's footfall was so light he did not wake up.

Hub eight, the last one before her home Hub in the Far Fortress, was a nasty, oppressive maze and Tod dreaded it. This was where Tod really needed her **PathFinder**. She stepped out of the archway and was confronted by a blank wall of blackened bricks, burned long ago in an ancient kiln. The wall rose up a little more than an arm's length away and ran parallel to the Hub wall so that it formed a narrow, dark corridor. Its height—almost ten feet—meant that there was no way Tod could see what lay beyond. She had the choice to turn either right or left, but although the wall formed a concentric circle within the Hub, it was not possible to reach the other arches by following the corridor. The passage was blocked just before each neighboring arch, forcing the traveler deep into the maze.

Tod hated the maze. It made her feel trapped, like a rat in a run. To take her mind off the sensation of stepping into a prison cell, she looked up at the sky. It was not a heartening sight. A heavy blanket of gray cloud hung low, and a fine mist of chilly drizzle was descending. Tod had no idea where in the world this Hub was—it was not on Marwick's map—but judging by the low level of light it lay much farther north than her village.

Tod turned her attention to the immediate task in front of her. The **PathFinder** was indicating that she must go left, and so she did. The narrow corridor curved gently around to the right, and before it had reached the next arch the way was blocked, so Tod was forced to take a sharp turn to the right. Ten steps later, Tod was presented with a choice of two turnings. The **PathFinder** indicated left once again, and so left she went.

Tod trod quietly, taking care not to betray her presence. It bothered her that she could not see more than a few feet ahead—who knew what might be lurking? The corridor was so narrow that if she did meet anyone there would scarcely be room to squeeze past. The thought of suddenly meeting a stranger in such a confined space was not good, but what really spooked Tod were the random patches of **Darke Magyk** that had been left by travelers over the millennia. The sharp twists and turns of the maze and its immensely high walls meant that these gloomy miasmas never shifted. They lurked in the dead ends and unnerved Tod as she passed by.

The only good thing about the maze Hub was the navigating. This was actually fun with the **PathFinder**, which happily adjusted to every change of direction and was always very definite when faced with a choice of turnings. How anyone without a **PathFinder** managed to find their path through to the right arch, Tod had no idea. She and Oskar had done a trial run with the **PathFinder** some months ago, and Oskar had written down every turn. He had made a copy for Ferdie and offered one to Tod in case she ever lost the **PathFinder**. But Tod had refused to take it—she was never going to lose her precious **PathFinder**.

The Hub was huge. Even with the **PathFinder** the maze took about twenty minutes to navigate; how long it might take without one, Tod could not imagine. Somewhere deep in the center of the maze there was said to be a skeleton lying sprawled in despair across a three-way junction. Luckily Tod's route did not take her past any skeletons, but it did go by some nasty swirls of **Darke Magyk**.

After about fifteen minutes, Tod felt she was making progress. The **PathFinder** had just taken her through a rapid series of left-right-left-right turnings that she remembered as being near the end, and now she was on the long straight run that led to the very last convolutions before her destination.

As Tod neared the final series of twists and turns, she saw something out of the corner of her eye that sent a stab of fear shooting through her. A black, round shape like the dome of a huge, bald head was moving rather jerkily just above the top of the wall. She stopped and stared, her heart beating so fast that her hand holding the **PathFinder** shook. Something ten feet tall was in the maze with her. And right then it was only one wall away.

A deep sense of fear seeped into Tod's bones as she watched the lurching up-and-down movement of the skull-top traveling along the neighboring run, no more than a few feet away. Now Tod was grateful for the high, obscuring walls and wished they were even higher. The **PathFinder**, after adjusting itself to her trembling hand, pointed steadily on. Tod walked quickly along the long straight corridor, relieved to see it was taking her in the opposite direction from the skull-top, which had turned suddenly and was now moving away.

Tod hurried through the rapid series of turns and could not resist breaking into a run down a long, curving corridor. At the end of the corridor was a fork. Tod was pretty sure she should take the left turn, but for once the **PathFinder** had no opinion. It sat trembling on its sphere, pointing accusingly at Tod herself as if to say, *You know how running upsets me.*

"Please," Tod whispered, "please show me the way." As she stood at the fork waiting for the **PathFinder** to settle, she felt a pricking sensation in the back of her neck. Very slowly, she turned around and saw something coming around the bend that would haunt her nightmares for years to come. A ten-foot-tall shining black skeleton: the body had a human configuration, but the head was that of a beast. Domed, long in the snout with two short yellow tusks on either side of the jaw like a warthog. Tod froze. She knew at once what it was and, thanks to her homework, she knew how lethal it was. Just as Septimus had done with Benhira-Benhara, Tod counted the eyes. But unlike Septimus she counted six: ranged down either side of the snout were three shining points of red. And each one was focused on *her*. This was the real thing

Tod didn't intend to, but she screamed. The **PathFinder** pointer fell off its onyx sphere and tumbled to the sandy floor. She scooped it up, fumbled and dropped the sphere, which rolled into the shadows. Clutching the **PathFinder** in one hand, Tod looked desperately for its sphere, but it seemed to have vanished. She glanced up to see the Kraan advancing

toward her with a mechanical, shuddering gait. Behind her, divided only by a skin of bricks, Tod knew, lay the arch she needed to get home, but it may as well have been in another country, for she had no idea how to get to it. All she did know was that she had to escape the monstrosity pitching rapidly toward her. And so Tod did the only thing possible—she turned and ran.

THE FAR HUB

“It’s Tod!” Ferdie said to Oskar excitedly.

Oskar and Ferdie were in the Far Hub. It was the nearest one to their village, but was half a day’s walk away, situated deep in a forest called the Far. The Far Hub followed the configuration of all Hubs with twelve arches leading off from a central circular space. When, as prisoners of the Lady, Ferdie and Oskar had first seen the Hub, it had seemed like a dungeon, but the villagers had made some changes over the past few months and it now looked and felt quite different. The Far Hub was almost cozy. It had a selection of rugs laid upon the flagstones, along with some comfortable chairs and blankets for when the chill of the night air seeped through the thick stone walls. It also had twelve stout doors covering the arches, each door secured by two long bolts.

Mindful of previous incursions of malicious intruders like Garmin, the Lady and Mitza, the PathFinder villagers had decided they were not prepared to leave the arches open. They knew that this went against the spirit of the Ancient Ways—which was to allow free passage—and so they kept a permanent Watch in the Hub in order to open the doors to any well-intentioned travelers. Behind each door they had set a lantern and a sign reading: *Welcome, Friend, to the Far Hub. Please knock and we will open the door.*

Oskar and Ferdie’s elder brother, Jerra, had been on Watch when they had Come Through the previous day. Jerra had listened to Oskar’s story, calmed him down, and made Oskar feel a whole lot better about the Ormlet and pretty much everything. Ferdie and Oskar had decided to keep Jerra

company on his Watch and had spent a happy time catching up on village news.

Jerra, who was dozing on a chair, opened one eye. “Someone coming?” he inquired.

Oskar no longer doubted Ferdie’s gift of **Feeling** the nearby presence of people they were connected to. “Tod’s coming!” Oskar told Jerra. “Can you help us with the bolt?” The top bolt was just out of their reach.

“Wait,” Ferdie said. “I can’t **Feel** her anymore. She’s gone away . . .”

“Gone away?” Oskar said. “Why would she do that?”

“It can’t have been her after all, Ferd,” Jerra said. Jerra was fairly skeptical of his little sister’s abilities. Unlike Oskar, he had not seen her in action.

Ferdie swung around to Jerra. “It was Tod,” she said crossly.

“Well, it can’t have been, can it?” Jerra said in his annoying trying-to-be-patient voice. “She would have Come Through by now.”

“But it was Tod. I *know* it was!” Ferdie very nearly stamped her foot, but remembered just in time that she was meant to have grown out of that.

Oskar was concerned. If Ferdie was so sure, then he believed her. “Let’s go and see,” he said. “She might be in trouble.”

Jerra leaped up from his chair. “Hey, not on my Watch!”

“Jerra,” Oskar said. “If Tod’s in trouble we have to help her.”

“Of course Tod’s not in trouble,” Jerra said irritably.

Ferdie went up to Jerra and looked him in the eye. “Jerra,” she said. “Remember that night the Garmin took me away?”

Jerra went pale.

“Well,” Ferdie continued, “Mum told me later that you thought you heard something in my room. But you decided you were imagining it.”

Jerra swallowed hard. He hated being reminded of the fact that maybe he could have stopped Ferdie being abducted by the Garmin.

“Well, even if I *am* imagining **Feeling** that Tod was near,” Ferdie said, “isn’t it better to check just in case?”

Jerra nodded. “Yeah, Ferd. ’Course it is.”

Each door had a spyhole to check on the traveler—no one wanted to inadvertently open the door to a Garmin, however politely it might knock. Jerra went over to the door where Ferdie had **Felt** something, flipped open the covering to the spyhole and checked the Way. “No one there,” he said.

“We still want to check it out,” Oskar said.

Jerra pulled back the bolts and opened the door. The musty, damp-earth smell of the Way poured into the Hub. “I’m keeping the door open. I’ll give you five minutes. Don’t go into the maze, okay? Just yell out. She’ll hear you if she’s there.”

Oskar and Ferdie walked into the **Vanishing Point**, and then a thousand miles north of the Far, they crept out into the maze. “It **Feels** bad,” Ferdie whispered.

Even Oskar could feel a sense of dread hanging in the air. “I’ll call out, shall I?” he whispered.

Ferdie nodded. It went against both their instincts to draw attention to themselves, but if Tod was in trouble she needed to know they were there.

“We’ll do it together,” Ferdie whispered. “One . . . two . . . three . . .”

“*Tod!*” they both yelled as loud as they could. “*Tod!* Are you there? *Tod!*”

The reply that came was not what they hoped for.

Oskar saw the movement first. He began to run toward it, thinking it was Tod, but in a split second he had skidded to a halt. Behind him Ferdie screamed out, “Oskie! Come back!”

With a giant, black, beast-headed skeleton at his heels, Oskar needed no telling. As soon as he was near, Ferdie grabbed her brother’s hand and pulled him through the arch. They hurtled through the **Vanishing Point** without a backward glance. In a moment they were rushing through the open door to the Far Hub.

“Shut the door, Jerra!” Ferdie yelled. “Quick! Bolt it. Hurry, hurry!”

Jerra slammed the door, shot the bolts and turned to the twins. “What was it?” he asked anxiously.

Oskar shook his head. “Horrible . . .”

“Jerra. Look through the spyhole,” Ferdie whispered. “See if it’s followed us.”

Jerra flipped the spyhole cover across. Then he turned around to Ferdie and Oskar. One look at Jerra’s face told them the answer.

“Will it break the door down?” Ferdie whispered.

“We’re not waiting around to see,” Jerra told them. “Come on, we’re out of here.”

“But what about Tod?” Oskar said.

“You don’t know that Tod was there,” Jerra said. “But we do know there’s a Kraan outside. *Come on.*” Jerra went to grab hold of his little brother and sister, but they resisted. They were not leaving without Tod.

“Jeez, you two,” Jerra said impatiently. “*Come on, will you?*”

And then Ferdie **Felt** the Kraan leave. “It’s gone,” she said.

Jerra sighed. “You can’t possibly know that, Ferd.”

Ferdie reached up and flipped open the spyhole cover. She was too short to see through. “Then have a look, Jerra.”

Rather nervously, Jerra peered through the lens of the spyhole. The tunnel was empty. He let the cover drop back and turned to Ferdie. “You’re right. It’s gone,” he said. He shook his head. “Weird.”

“That’s our Ferdie,” Oskar said.

Ferdie stuck her tongue out at Oskar and then felt bad. They were safe—but what about Tod?

FRIGHT AND FLIGHT

Tod was racing along the rat runs of the maze with the sole aim of putting as much space between her and the Kraan as possible. But the maze played tricks with her, just as it had done with the unfortunate possessor of the skeleton at the three-way junction. Tod ran blindly this way and that until, coming around a sharp bend, she saw the bony back of the Kraan no more than four feet ahead of her. It turned at the sound of her footstep and for a moment, Tod and the monster regarded each other with what appeared to be polite interest.

The manners did not last. Tod’s green eyes were like a magnet to the Kraan. Suddenly the beast was after her, running with long, loping strides, its bony arms outstretched, ready to grab. Tod took off like a rocket. The skeleton was fast, but Tod had agility on her side. She scooted around the bends, ducking into narrow corridors and when at last she dared to look back, the path behind her was clear. She slowed to catch her breath, randomly took the next turn to the right and saw an archway ahead. It was not the one she wanted, but right then anything that would get her out of the maze would do. As Tod ran into the arch she was sure she heard Oskar

calling her name. She hesitated, turned—and saw the Kraan heading fast toward her. She raced into the **Vanishing Point** and was gone.

Tod emerged into a small Hub covered in snow. Its low enclosing wall was topped by stunted trees, their branches swaying in the brisk, cold wind that moaned through the Hub. She glanced back down the tunnel and saw a telltale disturbance in the white mist of the **Vanishing Point**; a second later she saw a tall, dark shape within. In a moment Tod was racing into the neighboring arch, hurtling toward another **Vanishing Point**.

She came out into another Hub, this one knee-deep in dried grass like a collapsed haystack. She kicked her way through the grass and, trying to cover her tracks, she dove into the nearest arch. And so she continued: racing through countless Hubs, taking random arches, not caring where they led as long as it was away from the Kraan.

After many Hubs, Tod emerged into a large, peaceful one. Covered in short, rough grass dotted with yellow flowers, it looked like an overgrown garden. In the center was a copper bowl with water trickling into it. Tod stopped her flight and mustered the courage to look back at the **Vanishing Point** she had just Come Through. The white mist lay undisturbed, with no trace of an emerging shadow.

After five long minutes staring at the **Vanishing Point**, Tod decided she was safe—or as safe as it is possible to be when lost in the Ways infested with Kraan. She drank from the spring bubbling into the copper bowl and sat on the grass beside it. In the distance she was sure she could hear the pounding of the surf, and a pang of homesickness swept over her. This was a strange, wild ocean. She longed for the quieter *swish-swash* of waves creeping up the beach at home.

The Hub was heavy with heat and Tod sat for a while, letting it disperse the bone-chilling cold of the maze, all the while keeping watch on the arches and trying to forget how far away from home she felt. Now she understood that it was indeed possible to be lost in the Ways, and that tales of people wandering the world forever were probably true.

As she began to feel warm again, Tod turned her thoughts toward what to do. She unclenched her fist and looked at her **PathFinder**: it lay warm and heavy in her hand. But without its onyx sphere to turn on, it was nothing more than a beautiful, useless object. After a few minutes it crossed her mind that she might be able to find a stone that would do the same job.

She hunted through the grass and slowly walked the flagstone paths, but not one of the stones she found was the right size or shape.

Tod sat down beside the copper bowl, still keeping watch on the arches. She took out the paint-splashed stone that came from beneath her house in the PathFinder village. She stroked it gently and watched its little legs unfold. Her stone had been given a Pet Rock spell when she had first become an Apprentice, but it had since spent most of its time in her pocket. Tod knew she neglected it and she put her Pet Rock down on the ground to have a run around. Then she turned her attention back to the **PathFinder**. “Please,” she whispered to it. “Please, show me the Ways home.”

The **PathFinder** lay unresponsive in her palm, and so Tod, with an idea of looking it in the eye, put her thumb into its hollow dome and raised the **PathFinder** up so she was looking straight at it. “Show me the Ways home,” she said. “Please, **PathFinder**.”

The silver pointer wobbled a little. Then, as though it was trying to get comfortable, it shifted its position on her thumb and settled so that it was pointing down slightly. Something told Tod that maybe, just maybe, the **PathFinder** would work like this. Very carefully, she put her hand down to pick up the Pet Rock.

It wasn't there.

Tod looked at the ground, sure she would easily spot the green-splashed pebble, but she couldn't see it.

Pet Rocks move fast in the heat, and even faster when they have been cooped up in a pocket for weeks with nothing to eat but half an old toffee covered in fluff. Tod's Pet Rock was now happily having lunch and was oblivious to her despair. It had found some dried crumbs of bread and was eating quietly, sitting beneath a similar pile of gray stones, its green paint obscured by the green shadows of the grass above.

Tod could not believe how stupid she had been. Why hadn't she watched the rock properly? Even if the **PathFinder** did work sitting on her thumb, it was no use without something from home to touch its pointer to.

Tod got to her feet and began to walk slowly and methodically in circles, staring at the ground, sure that any moment she would see the bright green splashes of paint that Dan Moon had dropped while he had painted the windows of their house. The thought of her home gave Tod a pang of fear: how many years would it be before she found her Way home? If she

ever did . . . She pushed down the fear and carried on with her search. Her arm ached with the effort of keeping the **PathFinder** balanced on the top of her thumb, and her eyes ached with staring at grass and shadows. Once or twice she dropped to her knees to check on a likely-looking pebble but not one was splashed with green paint.

Tod looked up to rest her eyes, and as she gazed at the clear blue sky something Rose had said came into her head: *the StarChaser Charm was from the PathFinder archive.*

A whisper of hope came to Tod. She lifted the StarChaser from around her neck and held it in the palm of her left hand. It lay heavy and cool, its mysterious oily-blue hue showing swirls of green and purple in the sunlight. Scarcely daring to breathe, Tod touched the smooth silver point of the **PathFinder** to it and then held the **PathFinder** up high, its lapis dome sitting snug on the tip of her thumb, the thin streaks of gold shimmering in the sunlight.

The **PathFinder** tipped its nose up as if sniffing the air and then—*it moved*. Slowly but surely, it swiveled around and stopped, pointing to an arch. Tod felt like jumping with excitement, but she restrained herself: she was not going to upset the **PathFinder**. She cast a last glance around the Hub, hoping to catch a flash of green paint from her Pet Rock, but she saw no sign of it. She felt sad to be leaving it behind, but she hoped it would be happy; it seemed a nice place to live. Then she walked into the shadows of the arch thinking that when she got home she would look underneath the house for another green-splashed pebble. There were lots to choose from. Dan Moon was a messy painter.

WAY SURFING

This was the first time that Tod had traveled through the Ways with no idea how long her journey would be, and she found it hard to pace herself. Would the next **Vanishing Point** lead her to the welcome sign on one of the doors of the Far Hub, or would it be days, weeks or even months until she finally got there? Tod pushed away the fear that maybe she never would—that she would wander the Ways forever.

Four more Hubs went by. There was another temple, this time small, dark and damp. There was a circle of huts inside a palisade, each hut with a Way inside. There was a Hub in the basement of a castle, where hundreds of rats emerged from their burrows in the walls and watched silently as she waited for the **PathFinder** to make its decision.

As Tod walked into the arch the **PathFinder** had selected, the rats listened to the tinny sound of her footsteps, and when the sound suddenly stopped as she stepped into the **Vanishing Point**, they went back to their burrows and waited to greet the next traveler. It was unfortunate for the rats, who were an amiable tribe and merely curious to see who passed through their Hub, that the next travelers they scampered out to greet would be their doom.

As the rats scuttled back to their burrows for their last time, Tod was already in the next Hub—a lake of milky green water. The sky was a deep blue, air warm and scented with blossom, noisy with the sound of cicadas. The Hub was bordered by a low wall of crumbling sandstone into which the arches were set, and from each arch a line of stepping-stones led to a large flat rock in the middle of the lake.

Tod picked her way across the stepping-stones and stood on the central rock, holding her **PathFinder** up in the air. It teetered lightly on the very tip of her thumbnail and slowly turned and pointed to an arch. “Thank you,” Tod whispered. She took the **PathFinder** off her thumb and put it into her safe pocket—it was, she thought, time to take a break.

The warmth of the sun and the cool of the water was a delight. Tod sat on the central rock, eating a WizzBar and watching the flickering of water snakes across the surface of the water. A small frog hopped out at her feet, regarded her with wide, froggy eyes, and then leaped back into the lake with a delicate *plip*.

It was with some difficulty that Tod tore herself away to continue her journey. She set off across the stepping-stones and headed into the coolness of the next arch. She stopped for a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the dim light and then walked into the tunnel. As soon as Tod had taken a few steps she knew something was wrong—there was no welcoming glow of the **Vanishing Point**. She switched on her **FlashLight** and walked slowly forward and then stopped, puzzled. The beam showed a change from brick to bright blue lapis lazuli; this was the line where the **Magykal Vanishing**

Point began and it was always hidden by white mist. But there was no sign of any mist at all. Tod crept forward with a feeling of trepidation. The tunnels of the Ways always had an energy within that had made them feel like active, living things. But this one was like an ordinary, underground tunnel: damp, cold and pitch-dark. She walked on, her **FlashLight** showing nothing but bare lapis and a dusty stone floor. On the edge of the beam darkness lurked, deep and dense, and Tod pushed away thoughts of what creatures might be hidden within. She forced herself on, hoping that soon she would see the welcome sign of a hovering white mist.

Tod had walked for ten long minutes, going ever deeper into the tunnel, when she noticed an unpleasant smell of sulphur in the air. Fearful of poisonous gas, she stopped, considering whether to turn back. It was then she saw that the lapis walls looked different. Gone were its glints of gold, and the brilliant blue had become dull. Tod put out her hand to touch it. The surface felt rough and powdery, just like the stone in Driffa's ring. She took her hand away and looked at it: her palm was covered in fine gray dust. Driffa's words came back to her: *Like a slow fire inside a wall, the crumbling of our Enchantment will spread through the Ancient Ways . . . it will reach you eventually. . . . there is nothing you can do about it.* Tod stared at the gray dust in horror, then she turned and ran, hurtling back through the lapis tunnel, knowing that soon it would all be dust.

Tod emerged into the sunlight and calm of the dappled green water. She leaned against the warm stone, breathing in the sweet, fresh air. It took her some time to get the courage to take the **PathFinder** from her pocket, and when she did, she laughed with relief. The lapis shone deep blue and gold in the sunlight. She ran her finger over it to check the stone: it still felt hard and smooth to the touch. The **PathFinder** was healthy.

The disintegration of the Way forced a decision upon Tod: she would go back to the Far Hub through the Ways she had just traveled. It would mean braving the maze, but she had no choice. She set off across the stepping-stones toward the rock at the center of the lake. As she reached it, a movement ahead caught her eye. Tod's heart leaped with fear: a tall, dark shape was emerging from the very arch she was heading for. As Tod stared in horror, six red eyes locked onto her pair of green eyes.

Tod turned and ran, hopping from one stepping-stone to another, racing for another arch—she didn't care which one, any arch would do. But as she

reached it she saw another ten-foot-tall shadow emerging from its **Vanishing Point**.

Tod stopped dead, teetered on the stepping-stone, then turned and headed back to the central rock. The first Kraan was now also advancing toward the center, and Tod knew that she and the Kraan were going to arrive on it at the same time. Tod stopped and turned around. Behind her came the second Kraan; less coordinated than the first, it was having trouble with the stepping-stones, but unless it actually fell off, she knew she was trapped.

Tod hovered on her stepping-stone; her trembling fingers found her Apprentice belt and ran over the contents of its pocket. She had a basic **UnSeen Charm**, but that was no use when in a few seconds she would be sharing her stepping-stone with a Kraan. Thanks to her homework, Tod knew that **UnSeen** or not, the touch of a Kraan killed. The only other thing of use she had was a **SmokeBom** that she had made in her Conjuring Class. It would have to do. She took out the green glass tube, shook it to **Activate** it and snapped it in half. A great cloud of thick green smoke billowed out and engulfed her. Tod seized her chance and under its cover she slipped noiselessly into the water.

BREATHE

Even though Tod was one of the ten percent of PathFinders who had gills, even though she had used her gills before and knew she could breathe underwater, her first intake of water went against all her natural instincts. She spluttered and gagged as the lake water hit the back of her palate and the sensitive skin flap that had automatically closed off the top of her windpipe. She felt the gills deep in her sinuses open up and fill with water. Her head became heavy and a muddy, fishy smell filled her senses. Tod forced herself to keep on breathing in until she no longer felt the need for oxygen, and then very slowly she breathed out and began to sink down through the bright sun-slanted green water into the cooler, darker depths. By the time her boots hit the bottom of the lake she was used to the blurry vision and the strange feeling of being both outside and inside the water.

Very slowly, so that she did not disturb the surface of the water, Tod walked across the pebbly lake bed slippery with, she guessed, snake poop. As she moved steadily forward in slow motion, she felt the flickering of water snakes, and saw the occasional glancing beam of sunlight catch them darting like flashes of lightning. Tod had read somewhere that all water snakes were poisonous, but she tried not to think about that. She remembered how Oskar, who knew all about land snakes, had told her that all a snake wants to do is to get out of your way. As long as you did not corner it, he said, the snake would just slink away.

Doing her very best not to corner any snake, or upset its snake sensitivities in any way whatsoever, Tod moved slowly onward. She soon came to a line of pillars that rose up and broke the surface of the water—these were the stepping-stones. Like a water snake herself, she threaded through them, and found that she was almost enjoying being under the water. She negotiated three more lines of stepping-stone pillars, and at the fourth she stopped; these were the stepping-stones leading to the arch that would take her home.

The tall dark pillars of granite rose up like trees and broke the silver skin of the surface. Brilliant with sunlight, it shone like a mirror, and Tod could see nothing above it. She walked along the pillars until she reached the slimy green wall of the Hub. The arch leading to the Ways home was now directly above, but was it safe to come out yet? Were the Kraan gone or had they seen what she did and were waiting for her to surface? There was only one way to find out.

Hand over hand, Tod pulled herself up the slippery wall of the Hub, keeping her eyes on the surface, watching for any Kraan-shaped shadows. She broke the surface with scarcely a ripple and stayed in the shadow of the wall, watching the Hub.

It was empty.

With a long whoop of relief Tod breathed out a spout of water that would not have disgraced a small whale, then she hauled herself up onto the threshold of the arch. Tod sat on the warm stone and let the sun melt the chill that had lodged in her bones. She blew the water from her nose, coughed it from her throat. She sat, a little dizzy, while her sinuses once more filled with warm air and her ears popped and crackled. When at last

her nose had stopped running, Tod got to her feet, waited for the dizziness to settle and turned to face the arch.

It was time to go home.

WELCOME

The saddest Hub Tod walked through was the first one after the lake: silent as the grave, strewn with broken, bloodied bodies of rats. Tod squelched across to her archway, trying not to think about the blood and rat fur sticking to the soles of her boots.

But each and every Hub was frightening. With the fear that any moment another Kraan would appear—for if there were two, how many more would she find?—Tod took them all at a run and was at the maze Hub sooner than she expected. The **PathFinder** took her through, and when she was not checking the direction, Tod was watching the tops of the walls for bald, black skeleton heads. She saw none and could hardly believe it when she reached the arch that led to the Far Hub. She thanked her **PathFinder**, put it into her safe pocket and ran into the **Vanishing Point**.

Two minutes later, she walked out of the mist and broke into a huge grin. In front of her was a lantern beside a door with a shining knocker and the sign saying: *Welcome, Friend, to the Far Hub. Please knock and we will open the door.* As she went to lift the knocker, the door was flung open.

“Tod!”

“Hey, Tod!”

Two redheaded bullets hurled themselves at her, laughing and hugging her so hard that water squeezed from her jacket and puddled onto the floor.

“You smell of snake,” Oskar said.

“And mud,” added Ferdie, pulling her into the cozy warmth of the Far Hub.

Tod heard the bolt being shot across the door and Jerra saying, “Give her a break, you two.” And then, “Hey, Tod, come and sit by the fire. You’re soaked.”

Tod allowed Ferdie and Oskar to lead her to the cushions beside the charcoal brazier. Jerra looked down at Tod anxiously. “You’ve got blood on

your boots,” he said.

“It’s rat blood,” Tod told Jerra sadly. She shuddered, ice-cold at the thought of the Kraan—she suddenly realized what a narrow escape she had had.

Wrapped in a huge towel, her clothes drying by the brazier, Tod slowly sipped a large mug of Jerra’s hot chocolate. After a while she stopped shivering and began to tell about the terrifying journey through the Ways. Jerra, Oskar and Ferdie listened in shocked silence until she had finished, and then Jerra spoke.

“This is serious,” he said. “Kraan in the Ways. It makes them almost unusable.”

“It makes no difference,” Tod said flatly. “Soon all the Ways will be unusable anyway.”

Three pairs of bright blue Sarn eyes looked at Tod. “Why?” asked Oskar.

And so Tod added the last part to her tale—Driffa’s visit to the Castle and the **UnRaveling** of the Ways.

“Jeez . . .” Jerra said when Tod was finished. Like many of the younger ones from the village, Jerra had been enjoying the freedom that the Ways had given him to travel the world. Their isolated lives had been transformed. Jerra sighed. “And we’d only just discovered them.”

“But Tod, you won’t be able to go back to the Castle,” Ferdie said.

“None of us will,” Oskar said sadly.

“Yes, we will. We’ll go by boat,” Tod said. “But the thing is . . . oh, I can hardly believe it, but it’s true . . .”

“What is it?” Oskar asked anxiously.

“There might not be a Castle to go back to. It’s built on a bedrock of lapis; there is tons of the stuff beneath it. If that turns to dust then everything’s going to collapse.”

“*Collapse?*” Oskar and Ferdie gasped.

“But the Wizard Tower is **Magykal**,” Ferdie said. “It *can’t* collapse.”

“It is **Magykal** because of the lapis,” Tod explained. “If the lapis goes, it won’t be **Magykal** anymore. It won’t even *be* there anymore.” Even though she knew this was true, Tod couldn’t imagine the Wizard Tower, with its golden pyramid, its hazy purple windows and its beautiful, lazy **Sprites** disappearing in a pile of dust.

However, Oskar was not worried. “But it’s okay,” he said. “Ormie will make some more.”

Tod was silent. She couldn’t bring herself to tell Oskar what Septimus had said: that the Ormlet was dead.



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PART IX

A PROPOSAL

Mitza Draddenmora Draa had a score to settle. Her stepsister was Tod's mother, Cassi TodHunter Draa. Cassi had committed the crime of marrying Dan Moon, the only man—indeed the only human being—whom Mitza had ever loved. Cassi had destroyed Mitza's dreams, and she had paid the price when she had opened a letter from Mitza containing a flurry of sand within which lurked lethal sand flies. After a long illness, Cassi had died. But Cassi's death was no longer enough for Mitza. The older Cassi's daughter grew, the more she looked like her mother, and Mitza now felt mocked by Tod's very existence.

In the depths of the Red Queen's dungeons, to the background of the Lady lamenting her lot in life and Oraton-Marr groaning with pain, Mitza seethed with frustration. She was sick of waiting: it was time for Tod to pay the price of being her mother's daughter, and time for Dan to have nothing left of his foolish marriage. Mitza knew what she must do, but how was she to do it, imprisoned as she was?

However, nothing stopped Mitza on her path of revenge for long and soon she had hatched a plan. She sent a note to the Red Queen by a guard who was too scared to refuse. The note said:

*Dear Your Majesty,
I write to inform Your Royal Graciousness that I am able to
obtain for You the key to the Castle that the Sorcerer promised You.
Your most humble and incredibly obedient servant,
Mitza Draddenmora Draa*

Calmly, Mitza awaited a reply; she knew the Red Queen would not be able to resist. She was right. Late next morning Mitza was taken from the dungeon and marched blindfolded for two long hours through the cold corridors of the Red Palace. Just as Mitza was beginning to fear that she had misjudged the Red Queen and was on her way to have her head chopped

off, the guards came to a halt and pulled off her blindfold. Mitza recognized the gold doors at once: she was outside the audience chamber again. She pushed down a smug smile and composed herself. Now was her big chance.

Eyes downcast, she entered the chamber and curtseyed.

“I want that key,” the Red Queen said. “Get it.”

Five seconds later Mitza said, “Your wish is my command, Majesty.”

“You’re not a bloody jinnee, woman,” the Queen retorted. “I’ll tell you what my command is. I don’t want a key from that little witch trollop; I want the real thing from the Castle Queen herself. You will arrange for the Queen to meet me and hand over her keys. She will then escort me to her palace. Do you understand?”

Mitza went pale. This was not what she had offered the Red Queen, but she dared not protest. Grateful for the five-second pause, Mitza did some rapid thinking. “I will need a bag of gold for a **Hawk**, Majesty,” she said.

“A *hawk*?” the Red Queen spluttered.

There was a seven-second silence. Mitza decided to keep the queen waiting just a little bit longer than she was used to. “A **Hawk**,” she repeated impassively. “And another bag of gold for a **HoodWink**.”

The Queen stared at Mitza through narrowed eyes. The woman was impressive. “Give her what she needs,” the Queen instructed the guards. She coolly returned Mitza’s dead-eyed stare. “You will return in three hours. You will then conduct me to my new Palace.”

Mitza did not react. She had long ago learned that when something scared her witless it was best not to show it.

The Red Queen got to her feet. “Three hours from now. Or I shall have your head on a spike. Now, go!”

TO HIRE A HAWK

Mitza walked out of the Palace, shocked. *Three hours*—how could she do everything in three short hours? She considered fleeing the Red City, but she knew it would be useless; the Queen’s outriders would track her down. Clutching her bags of gold, Mitza hurried along the narrow alleyways of the Red City, her thoughts whirling rapidly into panic. She stopped, took a few

deep breaths and told herself to calm down; all she had to do was to find a couple of sorcerers. And that, she thought, would be easy in a city reputed to be infested with them.

However, it was anything but easy. Despite the saying in the Red City that there was one rat for every sorcerer, although it was sometimes hard to tell the difference—sorcerers did not generally advertise their whereabouts. They relied on a system of young runners—wannabe Apprentices—to guide clients whom they liked the look of to them. Unfortunately for Mitza, not one runner liked the look of her at all.

At first Mitza was not concerned. She hurried along the maze of alleyways, preoccupied with rehearsing her plan. It was, she told herself, a good one. The important thing was to get the Red Queen to the Castle, where she would be away from her Palace Guards. Once the Queen was in the Castle she would be in no position to be fussy about anything at all. Mitza would get the key from Marissa, show the Red Queen to the Palace, escort her over the threshold, and then lock her in and run for it. The two Queens could fight it out between them and she, Mitza Draddenmora Draa, would have the key to the Castle. She would be free to go wherever she wanted and—more important—free to track down young Alice TodHunter Moon. It was, Mitza thought, a very good plan indeed.

But first she had to find a sorcerer.

Watched from the shadows by cautious runners, Mitza plodded the hot and dusty byways with no luck. After an increasingly anxious hour, she found herself in a dead end and was faced with the long walk back. Panic was rising, when she suddenly spotted a tiny sign above a sun-bleached door. Written in faint gold letters was the word *Sorcery*.

Mitza pushed open the door and was faced with a curl of fiendishly steep stairs up one of the tallest towers in the city. Slowly, she began to climb. Ten minutes later, breathless and red-faced, Mitza was standing in front of a black velvet-covered door at the top of the tower. She wiped the sweat from her brow, wrung out her handkerchief and then swung a brass toad on a rope against a silver plate beside the door. A faint tinkling came from deep within.

After some long minutes a hominid with pink scales and black button eyes let her in. “Follow,” it whispered. Mitza went duck-footed behind the creature along a dark and thankfully cold corridor that smelled of burned

pumpkin. She was shown into a tiny room lined with distorting mirrors. “Show me your money,” whispered the hominid.

Mitza held out one bag of gold.

“Show inside bag,” said the hominid.

Taking care to keep it out of snatching distance, Mitza undid the drawstring to reveal yellow gold coins as thick as butter pats. The hominid licked its lips and scuttled away, leaving Mitza surrounded by a myriad of shining versions of herself. She closed her eyes. Some things were best left unseen.

The gold got Mitza admitted to the sorcerer’s room at once. The room was taller than it was wide and lit by a small slit window so high that all it showed was a strip of bright blue sky. A bar of light shone down onto a strikingly beautiful gray-haired woman who wore the typical Red City sorcerer’s scarlet robes heavy with gold embroidery. As Mitza entered, the sorcerer looked up and two beams of **Darke** light shone from her eyes. Mitza gasped and jumped backward. The beams stung.

“What is it that you lack?” asked the sorcerer in a soft voice.

Mitza decided to go for the difficult one first. “A **Hawk** to find a witch and take her to a place of my choosing. At a time of my choosing,” Mitza replied, careful to say all that she needed.

“Gold first. **Hawk** second.”

Mitza handed over the bag and the sorcerer poured the coins onto the floor. She looked down at them disdainfully. “New minted.”

“From the *Royal Mint*,” Mitza said.

The sorcerer picked one up and sniffed it. “Hmm . . . they smell right. You will need an article from the witch to give the **Hawk**.”

That was no problem for Mitza; she kept what she called “tabs” on everyone she could. She had a button from one of Tod’s tunics, a handkerchief from Dan Moon, a sliver of blue silk surreptitiously cut from inside the hem of the Lady’s dress and a silver star pried from Oraton-Marr’s cloak. She even had a long white hair from the Red Queen that she had found lying in the dust outside her audience chamber. And from Marissa she had one of the grubby green ribbons that she threaded through her hair. “Yes,” said Mitza.

The sorcerer eyed her client appreciatively. Here was someone who knew what she was doing. “You’re not looking for a job, I suppose?” she

asked. "I have a position vacant here. My last assistant was not entirely . . . *suitable*."

"Few are," Mitza commented.

The sorcerer gave a thin smile. "Indeed. My creature will give you the **Hawk**. If you choose to return it I shall refund half your gold. If you choose to stay as my assistant I shall return all your gold, bar one coin for my trouble." She handed Mitza a tiny scroll, sealed with a blob of fat black wax. "The **Incantation**. Make eye contact with the bird at all times. Say it slow and clear. Make no mistakes. You will not get a second chance. I wish you good hunting."

"I thank you," Mitza replied in what she thought of as sorcerer-speak.

The sorcerer laughed. "You are sorely pressed for time," she observed. "And still you lack two things."

"I am," Mitza agreed. "And I do."

"What is it that you lack?" the sorcerer asked once again.

Mitza decided to go for business first, pleasure second. "A pair of **HoodWinks**," she replied.

The sorcerer chuckled. "You are hatching a fine plan, I can see. I am sorry to say I sold my last **HoodWink** only this morning—and for less gold than you would have paid. Yes, I know you have another bag. So, I will do a deal. For half of that bag I will give you a pass to the Gremelzin in the caverns. It will provide you with a fine pair of **HoodWinks**, I guarantee. But stand well back. It bites. Be sure to wear a shawl, for the cavern is infested with Maunds."

Mitza accepted the offer. She handed over half of the second bag of coins in return for a metal token in the shape of an eye. "Thank you," Mitza said, looking at the cheap piece of tin for which she had just exchanged a queen's ransom. "You have been most helpful," she said, hoping that this was true.

"What is your third lack?" the sorcerer inquired.

Mitza named the lethal sand flies that she had used so successfully with Cassi.

The sorcerer regarded her with a new wariness. "They kill at a touch," she said.

"Yes," Mitza agreed. "They do."

"You are familiar with their use?" the sorcerer asked.

“I am,” Mitza said placidly.

The sorcerer began to regret her offer of a job. Acquiring a murderous assistant was a sure way of shortening one’s professional career. She gave Mitza a cool smile. “I fear I am out of sand flies at present. But from the goodness of my heart I will give you another token for the Gremelzin. It will have the sand flies in stock.”

Mitza took the token: a small, black, seven-pointed star.

“A Death token,” said the sorcerer. “It will give you what you lack.” The sorcerer got to her feet and fixed Mitza in her gaze. “At the end of this alley you will find a small girl wearing black. She is my runner. At the sight of the tokens she will conduct you to the Gremelzin. I give you farewell.”

The hominid was waiting for Mitza by the velvet-covered door. He was holding a wooden box with an open grille for a top. Huddled in the dusty corner of the box was a tiny sparrow, trembling with fear. The hominid handed the box to Mitza with a respectful bow. It was impressed—it wasn’t every day the sorcerer agreed to hire out a **Hawk**.

TO FIND A PAIR OF HOODWINKS

It was Ayla’s first week as a sorcerer’s runner and she was learning fast. Ayla had watched Mitza go down the alley and had guessed that she was looking for a sorcerer, but after Mitza had roughly elbowed her out of the way, Ayla had not been inclined to help the hatchet-faced woman. But now the woman was back. She had a bird-in-the-box and two tokens for the Gremelzin’s cavern, which was the most dangerous place in the Red City, and where she wanted Ayla to take her. Ayla gulped. She saw the seven-pointed black star lying in the woman’s palm and goose bumps ran down her neck. It was the first Death token she had ever seen. This was not, she thought, turning out to be a good day.

Some runners would have turned the job down, but not Ayla. Ayla was from a poor family who lived in a tiny tent in the City of the Free. She longed to become a sorcerer, and the only way for an outsider to become accepted into the Guild of Sorcerers was to spend many years as a faithful runner, until at last a sorcerer trusted her enough to take her on as

Apprentice. Feeling rather nervous, Ayla conducted Hatchet-Face through a maze of alleyways until they arrived at the entrance to the underground cavern of the Gremelzin.

To Ayla's surprise, the woman showed her a gold coin and said it would be hers if she guarded the bird-in-the-box with her life while Mitza went into the cavern. Ayla nodded. But she had learned a lot in her first week and she did not expect to receive the coin. One look at the woman's hard eyes told her all she needed to know.

The network of caverns where the Gremelzin lurked was formed by an ancient underground river that fed the wells of the Red City. Few people ventured there unless they were desperate, for it was known to be inhabited by infant Maunds. Mitza had taken the sorcerer's advice and had placed her shawl around her shoulders.

After wobbling down a series of ladders, Mitza found herself in a tunnel, which was just a little too tight and a little too low for comfort. At the end of it glowed the dim red light of the cavern where the Gremelzin lived.

The Gremelzin was not a creature anyone would visit unless desperate. Covered in yellow scales, six-legged, with two sets of lizardlike hands and a long, pointed snout, it lay curled on an abundance of ragged cushions piled on a huge gilt chair. The Gremelzin was an intelligent creature. It had been found in a cave by the most powerful sorcerer the Red City had ever had, who captured it while it slept and set it to work in his storeroom. The creature took to the work at once and became obsessed by storage systems. Unfortunately, during a heated argument—the Gremelzin favored screw-top jars and the sorcerer preferred old-fashioned corks—the creature had bitten the sorcerer. The bite was venomous, and despite frantically trying every antidote possible, the sorcerer had died a lingering death. Unaware that its master had died, the Gremelzin faithfully continued dispensing the contents of the storeroom on production of one of the sorcerer's tokens. It lived on the bats and spiders that inhabited the cave and drank the cool fresh water from the underground river. It never wondered why the sorcerer no longer visited and was perfectly content with its lot.

Mitza entered the red-lit storeroom and put the tokens on the nail: a tall metal pillar with a flattened top. The Gremelzin scuttled over to it and

inspected the tokens. Its flat, reptilian eyes regarded Mitza. “Gold,” it hissed. “Gold for Death.”

Mitza counted out the gold from her bag, keeping one coin back for the runner. “That’s all I have,” she said.

The Gremelzin pushed the gold around disdainfully with its tiny pointed digits. It stared at Mitza. “Lie,” it said in a nasal, high-pitched voice.

And so Mitza handed over her last gold coin. “That *is* all I have,” she said.

“Truth,” the Gremelzin said. It slithered away and Mitza watched its suckered feet carry it effortlessly over the wall of screw-top jars, searching for the sand flies and the **HoodWinks**.

As Mitza stood in the gloom, one, then two, then three infant Maunds climbed rapidly up her dress and settled upon the broad space her shoulders provided. A Maund was an invisible, parasitic creature. An infant Maund would search for trailing hems, and then using its long, curved claws, it would climb the clothing until it reached the shoulders of its host. There it would squat, growing heavier at such a slow rate that all the unwitting host knew was a gradual sense of being weighted down, accompanied by a growing feeling of doom. In its adult stages a Maund’s claws would grow into the skin and curve around the collarbone until it roosted like an invisible vulture. Its host would become reclusive, depleted of energy, and fade into an early death. Mitza knew very well what a Maund would do, and thanks to the sorcerer’s warning, she was prepared.

At last the Gremelzin scuttled back, Mitza’s requests clutched in its top set of hands. First it gave her the **HoodWinks**: two matched necklaces of cut crystals the size of walnuts. Mitza took them and, surprised at their weight, she carefully put them into her pocket, which she wore in the old-fashioned way, as a soft leather bag tied around her waist.

The Gremelzin now showed Mitza a tiny gold vial with a silver top sealed with black wax lying in its lined, white palm. “Here is Death,” it said. “Take.”

Terrified of breaking the seal, Mitza took the vial between finger and thumb and placed it extremely carefully in her pocket. She thanked the Gremelzin, bowed and squeezed back down the tunnel. As she stepped into the courtyard, Mitza pulled her shawl from her shoulders in a rapid, deft movement and threw it to the ground. Taken by surprise, the infant Maunds

tumbled down with the shawl. Mitza stamped on the shawl with her heavy boots, squashing two of the Maunds. The third, in a panic, clutched the hem of her skirts and did not let go.

Mitza was so jubilant at her success that she was oblivious to the third Maund, which was now climbing back up her skirt. She snatched the bird box from Ayla, who asked for her gold coin. Mitza gave Ayla a brass penny and told her to be grateful. And Ayla was grateful—she had expected nothing more than a sharp kick, and a brass penny bought a lot in the City of the Free. However, she was not going to show it. Ayla gave Mitza a rude sign and ran off to find her next job, thinking that it was turning out to be not such a bad day after all.

Five minutes later, with a key she had stolen from Marissa, copied and returned, Mitza was opening a door into a hot, enclosed courtyard with just a single palm in its center and a channel of cool water running around its perimeter. She walked into the shadow of the palm tree and closed her eyes. She felt the air grow cool and her next breath tasted of damp leaves and mold. She opened her eyes to see dark green gloom and the outline of an ill-fitting door in front of her. Clutching the bird box, she pushed it open and stepped out into a quiet forest glade surrounded by trees hundreds of feet tall.

Mitza turned around to see the place she had just come out of, so that she would know it again. She was shocked—it was nothing more than a ramshackle pile of logs and leaves that had once, before it became an entrance to a Forest Way, been a charcoal-burner's hut.

Mitza was amazed that the Forest Way had actually worked. Marissa had told her about it many times, but Mitza had not expected the witch to be telling the truth. But here she was: thousands of miles away from the Red City, and as free as a bird. Why would she want to go back to the Red Queen and place herself in danger when she could just walk away and begin a completely new life?

The answer lay in one word: revenge. Revenge on Dan Moon, revenge on that two-faced witch Marissa and revenge on the Castle, which had given the wretched Alice safe harbor. Let the Red Queen come and lop off a few Castle heads—it would do them all good.

At that comforting thought, Mitza Draddenmora Draa allowed herself a small, tight smile.

HAWK-EYED

Mitza had heard that the Castle Forest was dense and she had been concerned that the **Hawk** might not easily fly away. But she was pleased with what she found in the glade. High above her was a gap in the tree canopy showing a clear patch of blue sky, which was quite big enough for a bird to fly through unimpeded. Mitza knew that the fewer obstacles put in front of a **Hawk** on a mission, the better.

Mitza put the sparrow's box on the ground. Kneeling beside it, she took out the **Incantation**, broke the seal and began to memorize the words, while the surrounding trees looked down with an air of disapproval. Ten minutes later, Mitza was ready. She lifted off the grille, reached into the box, grabbed the sparrow and held it up to her eye level. Two frightened black eyes stared at her. Slowly, clearly, not breaking the stare, Mitza said the **Incantation**:

*Bird you are, bird you be.
No longer wild, no longer free,
You will now serve only me.
Of you now I do require,
To find someone within the hour.
Bring her to a place I tell,
Do my bidding wise and well,
And I will free you from this spell,
But until then you work for me.
Bird you are, now Hawk you be!*

The sparrow did not take its eyes off her for one second. Mitza said the **Darke** words at the end of the **Incantation**—words that may be written only by the hand of a **Darke** sorcerer.

The sparrow began to change. Its feathers sprouted, its beak grew large and curved, and its frightened eyes changed to an angry, suspicious yellow. Quickly, Mitza pushed Marissa's green ribbon into the **Hawk's** ready beak. It held it fast and Mitza caught a glance from its eye. It understood.

"You **Seek** Marissa Janice Lane. A witch," Mitza told the **Hawk**. "Bring her to Snake Slipway beside the Moat at sundown."

Mitza stepped back and the **Hawk** jumped out of the box. It ran a few steps, and then with a powerful thrust of its wings, it lifted up into the air. Mitza watched it go, shooting up through the gap in the trees, its silhouette dark against the brilliant sky, the scrap of ribbon hanging from its beak. And then it was gone; Mitza was alone in the Forest and all was silent.

A sensation that she was being watched came over Mitza. She hurried back into the ramshackle entrance to the Forest Way, and then she was gone. Behind her the trees of the glade relaxed, glad to see an ill-wisher gone.

On the top of the hill in the Wendron Witches' Summer Circle, Marissa was sitting in the afternoon sun with what she thought of as "her" group of witches, known to other Wendrons as "the Toadies." They were discussing the party and in particular what Newt had done with the Kraan. Marissa had last seen Jo-Jo being pursued by the Kraan and she feared the worst. However, Marissa considered worrying about someone to be a weakness, and she was determined not to be weak. She was lying on the grass, staring up at the sky and trying—unsuccessfully—not to think about Jo-Jo when she saw the black shape of a bird hovering above the summer circle.

"Ooh, look, it's a hawk," said Byrony.

"Anyone got a spare mouse, ha-ha?" asked Madron.

"Yeah, I've got one." Ariel, determined to tamp down recent suspicions about her loyalty, took her pet mouse from her pocket and held it, wriggling, by its tail. "Come on, hawky, hawky! Come and get your supper!" Ariel trilled.

Star looked horrified. "Ariel, you can't do that to Pinkie," she protested.

"Why not?" Marissa said. "It's *her* mouse. And it's fun. Look, the hawk's diving. Oh, look it's— Argh!"

The **Hawk's** dive ended not with Pinkie in its claws but with Marissa. It landed on her stomach, its talons digging into her flesh. Marissa screamed in pain and leaped to her feet. "Aaargh!" she yelled, jumping around, swatting at the **Hawk**, which let go and rose up, fluttering in front of her, at head height. The swish of air from the beating of its wings and the glint of its yellow eye besieged her. "Go away, you stupid bird! *Go away!*" she shrieked, flailing her arms, batting at its wings. But the **Hawk** was immovable and its yellow eyes did not leave Marissa's face for a moment.

“Do something!” Marissa yelled to the other witches. Bryony made a tentative swipe but the **Hawk** lashed out with its beak and made a deep cut across the top of her hand. Bryony added her yells to Marissa’s and retreated fast.

A circle of onlookers had gathered to enjoy Marissa’s discomfort, for it was now clear to all that this was no ordinary hawk. “Marissa,” Ariel said. “It’s an **Enchanted Hawk**. It’s got your ribbon and it won’t leave you alone until you go with it.”

“But I . . . I don’t want to go with it,” said Marissa, unsuccessfully trying to look away from the **Hawk’s** piercing gaze.

“Well, it’s not going to go away,” Star said. “So you may as well go with it and see what it wants.”

Marissa knew Star was right. “Someone come with me,” she said. “Please. I don’t want to go on my own.”

The witches made faces at one another.

“Sorry, I’m on supper duty tonight,” said Madron. “Otherwise I’d love to. Obviously.”

“I can’t leave the Witch Mother,” said Bryony, clutching her hand. “I’m her gofer this afternoon.”

“*Someone* come,” Marissa said desperately. “Please!”

Ariel and Star looked at each other. This was something Queen Jenna would want to know about: a **Hawk** was serious **Darke Magyk**.

“All right,” said Star, taking care to sound very reluctant.

“We’ll go with you,” said Ariel.

“Oh thank you, thank you,” Marissa said gratefully. She tried to look at Ariel but she could not take her gaze from the **Hawk**. “I can’t stop looking at it,” she said in a small, scared voice. “What . . . what shall I *do*?”

“I think you have to promise to follow it,” Ariel said.

“But you’ll have to keep your promise,” Star said.

“Because if you don’t,” said Ariel, “it will . . .”

“It will *what*?” Marissa asked tetchily, already reverting to her old self.

Ariel and Star spoke gleefully in unison. “It will peck your eyes out!”

JERRA’S DUTY

Tod, Ferdie, Oskar and Jerra settled down for the night in the Far Hub. They demolished Jerra's supper of cheesy bean soup and sat around the fire toasting the supply of sweet crumpets that his girlfriend, Annar, had sent him off with.

Oskar and Ferdie were still catching up with all the news of the village, and Jerra had much to tell them about the rebuilding of the houses, the new village meeting place and the latest gossip. At first, Tod listened, happy to hear what had been happening and smiling at any mention of her father, Dan. But as conversation drifted to the Sarn family itself, Tod found her thoughts straying to the Castle, and she could not get an image of the Wizard Tower crashing to the ground out of her head. She thought of Septimus and how he had no idea that it might actually happen very soon indeed. She worried too that neither he nor Marcia knew about the Kraan loose in the Ways. She imagined the creatures creeping out of the **Hidden** arch in the Wizard Tower courtyard, just as the Garmin had done not so very long ago. To the background of Oskar and Ferdie giggling at a family joke, Tod came to a decision. As Septimus's Apprentice it was her job to warn him. And she must do that as soon as possible—even if it did mean going back into the Ways. The sooner she went, the better: she must go that very night.

There was a lull in the conversation while Jerra hung the kettle on its tripod over the fire. "Hot chocolate," he said. "Then sleep."

"Aw . . ." Ferdie and Oskar protested.

Jerra noticed that Tod was silent. "Hey, Tod, you look wiped out. Here," he said, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders. "You're still cold."

Jerra's gesture brought tears to Tod's eyes, which she blinked away quickly. She longed to stay in the warmth with her friends but she knew what she must do. She stood up and handed the blanket back to Jerra with a wistful smile. "Thanks," she said. "But I've got to go now."

"Huh?" Jerra looked nonplussed.

Oskar and Ferdie were on their feet.

"Go?" asked Oskar.

"Where?" demanded Ferdie.

"Back to the Castle," Tod said. "I have to tell Septimus what's happening to the Ways."

"No, you don't!" Oskar and Ferdie said together.

“That’s crazy,” Oskar added. “You were lucky to get here at all, Tod. There’s no way you’re going back in there again. Suppose you meet the Kraan again?”

Tod had thought of that. “I’m going to go **UnSeen**,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

Jerra was adamant. “Tod, no. You mustn’t do this. If you go back now I don’t think we will ever see you again. Seriously. I mean it.” Jerra’s tone took Tod aback. She opened her mouth to protest, but Jerra hadn’t finished. “And how,” he demanded, “am I going to explain to Dan that we had you here safe—by the skin of your teeth—and let you go straight back into danger? And that is why he will never see his daughter again? Huh, Tod? Tell me that, please.” By the time he had finished Jerra sounded almost angry.

There was an awkward silence in the Hub while Tod tried to choose between the impossible: Septimus or Dan. She felt annoyed with Jerra for making her feel guilty about Dan. “It will be fine,” she said brusquely. She pointed to the door to Arch VII. “I’m going to go the quick way. I’ll be on the Outside Path in seconds.”

“Not necessarily,” Jerra told her. “You may think it’s a direct route to the Castle but I can tell you that is one weird Way through there. It has **Hidden** branches. I know because I thought I’d go and see Oskie and Ferd and it took me three days to get back here. It’s a horrible journey if you get it wrong.”

“I won’t get it wrong,” Tod told her tersely.

“Tod, listen to me,” Jerra said, a quiet desperation in his voice. “There’s some kind of current in that Way. It’s terrifying. It pulls you in. You feel like you’re falling for miles and miles. You’re taken wherever it wants you to go. You are utterly helpless. Please, believe me.”

Tod was silent. She remembered something Marwick had called the Wild Way Wind and how it lurked in Hidden Ways. “Lucy was always fine when she used it,” she said stubbornly.

“That was last year,” Jerra said. “This is now. The Ways change. As you know, Tod.”

Tod stood irresolute as the three Sarns glared at her, daring her to move. She knew that none of them understood how much she had come to love the

Castle, and how responsible her Apprenticeship had made her feel. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I have to go.”

Jerra strode across the Hub and stood in front of the door to Arch VII. “No,” he said. “I will not be party to this. I will not let you through.”

“You have to,” Tod told him crossly. “It’s the rule of the Ways. You agreed to let all pass through here freely.”

Jerra shook his head. “I don’t care what I agreed, Tod. This door stays closed and that is that.”

Tod was furious—how dare Jerra do this? She was considering her next move—an **UnSeen** . . . slip the bolt . . . she could just about reach . . . and then run like crazy—when there was a knock on the door of Arch II.

Rap—rappity—rap.

The standoff in the Far Hub evaporated. All eyes turned to the door across Arch II.

Who—or what—was behind it?

HOODWINKED

Jerra turned to his three guests. “I’ll have to open the door,” he said. “You three go upstairs. Just in case it’s . . .”

Jerra got a taste of his own medicine from Tod. “No, Jerra. We’re staying here with you.”

“Too right,” said Ferdie.

“You bet,” added Oskar.

Rap—rappity—rap came again from the door of Arch II.

“Okay,” Jerra said. “But stay by the stairs. So you can run if—”

A louder, more insistent *rap—rappity, rappity—rap* came from the door. Someone was getting impatient.

“Open the door, Jerra,” Oskar said. “We’ll be fine.”

They retreated to the shadows by the stairs and watched Jerra draw back the bolts and pull the door open. Two figures, one tall and thin, the other short and wide, both wrapped in long, hooded traveling cloaks, hurried into the Hub, bringing with them a mixture of musty air and annoyance. On the outside of their cloaks each wore, rather incongruously, an identical

necklace of large cut crystal beads. It was odd, Jerra thought, that two such mismatched figures should have such similar taste in jewelry. The facets of the beads flashed like fire, throwing the wearers' faces beneath their hoods into deep shadow and giving Jerra a strange feeling of not quite understanding what he saw.

"That is not, young man, what *I* call a prompt answer," the short traveler said.

"I apologize," Jerra said. "Which Way do you wish to exit by?"

"Four," was the curt reply.

The three watchers in the shadows exchanged glances—*they were going to the Castle.*

It had been agreed that those letting travelers through the Ways would never comment upon their destination, but Jerra could not resist. "You are traveling to the Castle?" he asked as he walked them politely across to Way VII.

"To *my* Castle," the tall one corrected him.

"*If* we ever get there," the short one added grumpily.

Tod, Ferdie and Oskar stared at the figures, trying to make out their features. They had a strange fuzziness to them that seemed to repel detailed inspection. It was even hard to tell if they were male or female; the voices were oddly indistinct. They watched as Jerra held the door open and the figures stepped into the darkness of the Way, their fuzziness blending into the gloom. With the swish of cloaks upon the stone floor they were gone.

Jerra closed the door and shot home the bolts. "Well," he said, walking back to the fire, "that was a strange pair. I looked straight at them, but it was odd, I couldn't quite *see* them."

"There was some kind of **Enchantment** on them," Tod said.

Jerra shivered. "Spooky. Being so close to something like that. They did feel kind of . . . weird."

"They did," Tod said, "and the *really* weird thing is I felt I had seen them before." She turned to Oskar and Ferdie. "Did you feel that too?"

"A bit," Oskar said, unsure. "Maybe."

"I know what you mean," Ferdie said. "It was like a word that you can't quite remember."

"Well, I can't say I recognized either of them," Jerra said as he took the kettle off the fire. "And I don't think I'd want to either. Miserable dingbats,

both of them. They couldn't even manage one little thank-you."

Tod said nothing more about her decision to go back to the Castle and the three Sarns assumed that she had seen sense. She sat quietly with her friends beside the fire and helped Jerra shave curls of chocolate into a mixture of water and milk heating over the fire. But all was not as it seemed. Tod had decided to wait until everyone was asleep and then creep away. She did not want to make Jerra feel bad for allowing her to leave, and she also wanted to give the two unsettling strangers time to get out of the Way. The short one gave Tod the creeps.

Feeling a little guilty about her plans, Tod helped make up three beds from cushions and blankets and then, for appearances' sake, she settled down. Oskar and Ferdie fell asleep at once, but annoyingly, Jerra sat reading by the fire while Tod lay fighting to keep her eyes open. Tod longed for Jerra to go to sleep, but Jerra was restless. He prowled the Hub, he checked the doors, he made another hot chocolate, he wrote a letter—anything, it seemed to Tod, to avoid going to sleep. From beneath half-closed eyes, she watched and waited, until sleep crept up on her, and she could fight it no longer.

At the sound of Tod's regular breathing, Jerra whispered, "Tod . . ."

He got no response. *At last*, he thought, *she's gone to sleep*. Wearily, Jerra put down his book, leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Within seconds he, too, was asleep.

SNAKE ON THE SLIPWAY

The **Hawk** drove Marissa across the drawbridge and into the Castle. It was early evening by now, and a summer squall was blowing in. The wind was cold and rain was beginning to fall.

Marissa was scratched, bruised and exhausted. The **Hawk** had dogged her every step, the relentless beat of its wings above sounding like the heartbeat of a determined, deadly pursuer. It had taken no trouble over such niceties as footpaths and had dragged her through brambles, over rocks and fallen trees. The **Hawk** had allowed her not a second's rest; whenever she had slowed down it had dived and pecked the top of her head. As the **Hawk**

hurried her along a deserted Wizard Way, Marissa was thankful that all the shops were closed and the place was quiet. She did not want anyone to see her in such a powerless state. At the end of the Way, the **Hawk** forced Marissa to take the turn into Snake Slipway, and she grew seriously frightened. In front of her lay the Moat: deep and dark. *The Hawk was going to drown her.*

At the foot of Snake Slipway Marissa, terrified of the water, refused to take another step. She threw her hands over her head and waited for the **Hawk** to dive-bomb her. Nothing happened. She risked a quick upward glance and saw the **Hawk** was merely hovering, marking the spot where she stood. Marissa understood that she had reached her destination. She sank gratefully to the ground and sat with her arms folded over her head, feeling the gold circlet for comfort. The rain beat down and the wind blew straight across the Moat and set her shivering as the damp seeped through her clothes. Her head hurt from where the **Hawk** had pecked her, and she felt wretched. She was grateful that she had not been forced into the Moat, but now she began to be afraid of the reason she had been brought here. Whatever it was, it was not going to be good.

At the other end of Snake Slipway, lurking in the shadows, Ariel and Star watched with interest. It was cold and wet and what they really wanted to do was have a coffee in Wizard Sandwiches and get warm, but they knew the wait would be worth it. Queen Jenna would be very pleased to know what Marissa was up to.

It was a long half an hour later when Ariel and Star saw two cloaked figures step down from the Outside Path.

“They’re wearing **HoodWinks**,” Ariel whispered.

“Nice,” Star said. “I always wanted one of those. I wonder who they are?”

As if in answer to her question, the tall figure threw back her hood, pulled the heavy crystal necklace over her head and hurled it into the Moat. The two watching witches now saw her to be a thin, severe-looking woman with white hair in very long plaits that were dark at the ends. Beneath her cloak she wore a pale red robe, and placed firmly on her head was a simple crown set with rubies that glistened in the rain.

“Wow. She looks like a Queen,” whispered Ariel.

“Jenna won’t like that,” Star whispered back. “Two Queens in one castle is bad news.”

“Maybe we could work for her, too.” Ariel giggled.

“No way,” Star said. “She’d chop your head off as soon as look at you.”

They watched with interest as the second, short figure copied the Queen’s actions, pulling off her **HoodWink** and sending it flying into the water.

“What a waste,” muttered Star.

“Shh,” hissed Ariel. “Look, it’s *her Hawk*.”

They watched the woman hold up her hand to the **Hawk**. The bird fluttered down to her wrist and accepted a morsel of food. There was a flash of yellow light, and a small, terrified brown bird sat in its place. With a practiced flick of the wrist, the woman snapped the little bird’s neck and threw it to the ground.

“Oh!” Star gasped.

“Oh, that’s horrible,” Ariel said. “How could she do that to a poor forest creature?”

“Come on,” Star said, “Let’s get out of here before she does that to us.”

“I’d like to see her try,” Ariel scoffed. But she hurried after Star. She wasn’t going to hang around. Just in case.

Marissa felt much better now that the **Hawk** was gone. She was also extremely relieved to see that the person controlling it was only stupid old Mitza. Marissa was less happy to see the Red Queen, however. There were quite enough Queens cluttering up the Castle as it was. If she was going to have any chance of realizing her ambitions, she needed the Castle to be Queen-free. She was going to have to put the Red Queen somewhere and keep her quiet while she decided what to do with her. But where did one hide a Queen? And then it came to her—in a palace, of course.

Marissa thought fast. If Jo-Jo’s rather unpleasant gift actually worked, she could talk anyone into anything, the Red Queen included. She slipped her hand into her pocket, flipped open the lid of the little green box, and her fingers found the dried snake tongue. Feigning a polite cough, Marissa raised her hand to her mouth and popped the dried snake tongue in. She gagged. It tasted vile.

Marissa took a deep breath and addressed the Red Queen. “Sister. I, the Castle Queen, bid you welcome.”

Mitza’s mouth fell open in amazement.

The Red Queen stared at Marissa. She took in her gold circlet, which she could tell was the real thing. She noted Marissa’s haughty bearing and queenly way of speaking and thought how strange that she had once considered her to be a mere witch. “Sister,” she replied, “I thank you.”

Marissa was jubilant—Jo-Jo’s snake tongue worked!

The Red Queen gave an embarrassed simper. “I must confess, sister Queen, that in the past I mistook you for a witch. I cannot imagine how I made such a mistake.”

Marissa laughed. “It is a little hobby of mine, to go among my people dressed as a witch.” Buzzing with her success, Marissa continued. “Sister, I am so pleased that you have come to my Castle at last, after all my pleas to you. It gives me great pleasure to consign my Castle to your tender care.”

The Red Queen felt puzzled. Her memory was not what it was, she thought. She had no recollection of Queen Marissa pleading with her to take over her Castle. “The pleasure is all mine,” she said, not entirely truthfully. A feeling of disappointment was beginning to steal over the Red Queen. She cast a glance at the results of Rupert Gringe’s clear-out spilling out over the slipway and pursed her lips. The place was a mess. It was also windy, and the rain was freezing cold. The Red Queen loved rain, but in the Red City it was always warm and gentle, not icy and sharp as dagger points. No wonder Queen Marissa was leaving.

It had not escaped Marissa’s notice that the Red Queen was shivering. “Sister, allow me to conduct you to your Palace. The fires are lit and your welcome banquet awaits,” Marissa lied with increasing delight. She held out her left hand, palm upward, at shoulder height. The Red Queen placed her own hand upon it and then, at a sedate and queenly pace, they set off through the rain, progressing past Rupert Gringe’s pile of boat junk, with Mitza hurrying beside them.

Mitza was not at all happy with the turn of events. “But Your Majesty,” she began, “she really *is* just a witch. She’s bewitched you and—”

Marissa cut Mitza short with a loud laugh. “I see you brought your fool,” she said to the Queen.

The Red Queen laughed a conspiratorial, just-between-us-Queens kind of laugh. Marissa savored it. “How perceptive you are, sister Queen,” the Red Queen said. “You open my eyes to so many things. You are right, I have indeed brought my fool.”

This was a step too far for Mitza. “I am not a fool,” she protested.

Marissa took note. It seemed that the snake tongue worked best when addressed to the person to whom the lies were directed. She turned to Mitza, making sure to look her in the eye. “Well said, fool. It is what any fool would say. But you have been in the service of her Majesty as her fool for many years. Your fame has spread far and wide.”

Mitza looked mortified. How could she have forgotten such a thing? It was true—she was indeed a fool. Embarrassed at her own presumption at walking beside the two queens, Mitza dropped back into a suitably respectful position some five paces behind. She followed them, head bowed against the rain, feeling foolish in so many ways.

A SURFEIT OF QUEENS

The Palace was not an imposing building. It was built of weatherworn stone and sat long and low. Its windows were small and numerous, each with a single candle burning. It looked pretty, but was nothing like the immense, gold-strewn, closely guarded fortress that the Red Queen was used to. The rain was now coming down in slanting sheets, and the wind was blowing up the drive, which wound artistically through Queen Jenna’s new wildflower meadow. The Red Queen was seriously unimpressed—this palace was no better than a hut in a field.

They walked over the simple plank bridge across the ornamental moat—which the Red Queen took for a ditch—and approached the battered old wooden doors. Marissa was about to use her Universal Castle Key when, to her surprise, the doors swung open. She led the Red Queen over the threshold only to very nearly collide with the reason for the doors’ opening—Queen Jenna herself.

Jenna stopped dead. “My circlet!” she gasped.

Marissa knew she must speak—and fast. She fixed Jenna in her gaze and put the snake tongue into action.

“Sister, I—” she gabbled.

Jenna was so cross about her circlet she did not give Marissa the chance to continue. However, the snake tongue had done its work: Jenna now saw Marissa as her sister. And her sister had clearly stolen her circlet. “*What* are you doing with my circlet, Marissa?” she demanded. “Give it back at once!”

Desperately, Marissa plowed on. “It is *my* circlet, sister. You know it is *mine*.” Afraid that the Red Queen would become suspicious, Marissa turned to her and said, “My little sister is somewhat . . . *different*. You know how it is in families.”

The Red Queen gave an awkward smile: she had disposed of her own annoying little sister years ago.

Jenna stared at Marissa, her bemusement deepening. Why, she wondered, had she thought that her sister’s circlet belonged to her?

Marissa continued, determined to cover all bases. “Just as you know, little sister, that this is *my* Palace, ha-ha!”

Jenna felt utterly bewildered by now. It was so odd that she had been thinking of the Palace as her own, but of course it belonged to her sister. It was all most unsettling.

Marissa did not let up. “And you are leaving *my* Palace now, sister. To go home to . . .” Marissa paused to decide what to say. Jenna had not always been very nice to her and she decided to have some fun. “To your little hut at the back of Gothyk Grotto.”

Jenna looked puzzled. Try as she might, she just couldn’t picture her hut.

“You know, the one with the leaky roof,” Marissa explained. “Beside the toilets.”

“Oh . . . yes . . . of course,” Jenna said. “Silly me, forgetting.”

“Well, you know how dippy you are, little sis,” Marissa said cheerfully. “Off you go now.”

And so Jenna hurried away into the rain, feeling extremely disconcerted. If she had not bumped into Septimus coming up the drive, she would have spent a very uncomfortable night indeed.

While Septimus was trying to work out why Jenna was being so odd, Marissa was leading the Red Queen and Mitza up the sweeping Palace staircase. Marissa had once been to a party there and thought she remembered where the Throne Room was. She led the two bewildered women along a galleried corridor at the end of which she was relieved to see the ornate double doors of the Throne Room. With a confident flourish, Marissa unlocked them with her Universal Castle Key and showed the Red Queen and Mitza inside. And there she left them, the Red Queen ensconced upon the throne, Mitza sitting glumly at her feet.

Five minutes later, snake tongue still in place, Marissa was back with another, even crazier plan. “Sister Queen,” she said, “I am sure you would wish to start your new reign with a clean crown. My Palace has an overnight crown-cleaning service, which you *will* want to use.”

The Red Queen thought that there was nothing she would like better. She handed her crown to Marissa, then she leaned back in the throne with a sigh and closed her eyes. It had been a long and rather trying day. With her fool curled up at her feet, the Red Queen fell into a sleep full of strange dreams. The fool at her feet, however, did not sleep a wink. The Red Queen had the most outrageous snore.

Marissa retreated to one of the guest rooms. She put the snake tongue back in its little green box and swapped Jenna’s circlet for the Red Queen’s crown. It fit perfectly. It is not easy to sleep wearing a crown, but Marissa managed it with no trouble at all.

As soon as Jenna told Septimus about her “sister” Marissa returning to “her” Palace Septimus realized that Jenna had been **BeWitched**—and it was obvious by whom. Gently but firmly, he led her to the Wizard Tower, then he sent for Jo-Jo. Jo-Jo had been enjoying his hero status and was mortified to find he was once again the no-good Heap brother. Almost tearfully, he confessed to giving Marissa the snake tongue.

Armed with a Mongoose **Reverse**, Septimus released Jenna from her **BeWitchment**. Jenna was furious when she understood what had happened and it was all Septimus could do to dissuade her from setting off for the Palace right away.

“Jen,” he said, “you need to sleep this off. Being **BeWitched** messes with your head. Leave Marissa and her weird friends there for tonight; they

can't do any harm. I'll come back with you tomorrow and we'll sort them out together."

Jenna discovered that Septimus was right. She felt edgy and anxious and could not sleep. She stayed up all night playing cards with Milo and slept most of the next day, leaving Marissa the run of the Palace.

The next morning, while Jenna at last drifted off to sleep in the spare room at the top of the Wizard Tower, the occupants of the Throne Room were wide-awake and furious: their **BeWitchment** had worn off. Mitza now knew she was nobody's fool and the Red Queen knew that the Castle was a dismal place unworthy of her talents. They both wanted out. But when they tried to open the Throne Room doors they found they were prisoners in what the Red Queen called "this ratty little dump."

With the Red Queen's crown stowed safely inside her secret cloak pocket, Marissa walked past the shouts and the reverberating thuds upon the door with her head held high and proceeded down the stairs. Let them see what it's like to be helpless, she thought. It served them both right.

As Marissa reached the Palace doors, a ghostly ancient knight with one arm and a serious dent in his head stepped forward and barred her way with his sword.

"Halt!" barked the knight, whose name was Sir Hereward.

Marissa let out a loud shriek.

"I shall raise the alarm," Sir Hereward said in a low, threatening voice. "Unless you leave Queen Jenna's circlet here, in my custody."

"Huh, you daft old ghost," Marissa said, recovering fast, "I was going to do that anyway. See?" With that she hung the circlet on the doorknob. From it dangled a note saying, *Jenna: All yours, I've got a better one now. Have fun! Marissa x*

Sir Hereward gave a disapproving sniff and watched Marissa flounce out and head off down the drive. Then he **Caused** the door to slam shut and stood guarding the circlet until its rightful owner returned.

Marissa set off to look for Jo-Jo. She found him in Gothyk Grotto in a very gloomy state, and took him to Wizard Sandwiches. There, over a Palace Special (a long hot dog covered in red ketchup and yellow mustard—red and gold being the colors of the Castle Queen), Marissa told Jo-Jo her

latest, most daring plan. Jo-Jo listened, his eyes growing ever wider with amazement. Sometimes Marissa's sheer nerve astounded him.

"Well?" Marissa asked. "What do you think? Are you up for it?"

Jo-Jo stared at Marissa. "I think it's a crazy idea," he said.

Marissa's face fell. She wanted to do this so much, but only—she suddenly realized—if Jo-Jo was with her.

But Jo-Jo hadn't finished. "And yeah," he said, "I'm up for it."

Marissa broke into a huge smile. "You *are*?"

"Yeah. I am. *Queen* Marissa."

"King Jo-Jo?" asked Marissa.

Jo-Jo laughed. "No, thanks. Not for me. But I'll enjoy hanging out in the Palace."

"And the Red City too," said Marissa. "You'll love it. There are tons of sorcerers. You can have your own sorcerer tower and everything. Because when I'm Queen of the Red City, you can have anything you want."

And so Marissa and Jo-Jo sat planning their future over the Palace Special. When they were finished, Marissa paid the bill—to the surprise of the staff—and then she and Jo-Jo walked out and headed for the **Hidden** arch that the Red Queen and Mitza had Come Through the night before.

It was late morning when the senior Palace housekeeper heard some very rude language coming from the Throne Room. She opened the doors to find not a couple of drunken sailors—as she had expected—but two very peculiar women who she assumed had wandered off from the Castle Home for Confused and Deluded Persons. The housekeeper's suspicions were confirmed when the tall, scary-looking one stormed out, declaring she was returning to her Queendom *at once* and anyone who tried to stop her would soon find they had mislaid their head. The housekeeper watched her go, shaking her own still firmly attached head, thinking how sad it was, the state that some people ended up in. When the housekeeper turned around, the weird one with a mouth like a hatchet had gone. The housekeeper was on edge all day, hoping she wasn't going to bump into her around some dark corner. That night she armed herself with a saucepan and bolted her bedroom door.

In the gloom of the eighteenth floor of the Wizard Tower, Septimus, Marcia and Newt were closeted in the **Darke Archives**, a circular room clad with ancient slate that glimmered in the candlelight like the surface of a deep, black lake. This was where Septimus had placed all the **Darke** documents from the Pyramid Library. It also contained the contents of Sorcerer's Secret, an ancient and surprisingly **Darke** bookshop that had recently closed in the Port.

Septimus had rescued the entire stock just as it was being thrown on a large bonfire. Much of it was still packed in boxes and all of it smelled of smoke. It was these boxes that they were now examining, for Septimus and Marcia knew that there was no **Kraan Reverse** to be found in the Wizard Tower.

"So we can do the **Reverse** on that Kraan you've got in the **Sealed Cell**, and then all the others get **Reversed** too?" asked Newt. "At the same time. All at once?"

"Yes. That's what happens with a **Chain Reaction**," Marcia said.

"They go back to being beads, right?" asked Newt. "Six for each Kraan?"

"Right," Marcia said curtly. "Now get on with those boxes."

"Yes. Sorry." Newt got back to work unpacking the boxes and sorting the books and pamphlets into possibilities.

Septimus and Marcia carried on methodically going through each page of every book, trawling through endless permutations of nasty, vindictive and vicious spells, **Enchantments** and **Incantations**. It made for dismal reading.

"The things people want to do to others," Marcia said, exasperated at one particularly gruesome **Hex**. "It makes you despair."

"Horrible," Septimus agreed, as he reached the end of a small pamphlet called *A Fear a Day the Easy Way*.

They worked steadily on through the mire of nastiness, desperate to find the **Kraan Reverse**. Newt made them coffee, brought them sandwiches, stacked away used books and did anything he could to speed their search, but they dared not go too fast for fear of missing a vital clue. And they dared not go too slow either, for they knew that every hour that passed was another hour that Tod, whom Septimus feared was still deep in the Ways, was in mortal danger.



PART X

THE NEXT WATCH

Tod awoke in the Far Hub to find that everyone was up and getting ready to leave.

“Morning, Tod,” Jerra said cheerily. “I left you to sleep. You looked like you needed it.” He grinned. “It’s five hours after dawn now; the next Watch should be here pretty soon.”

“Oh.” Tod felt wretched. What kind of Apprentice fell asleep when there was something so important to do?

“Fancy any breakfast?” Jerra asked.

The bacon smelled wonderful. “Yes, please,” Tod said, telling herself that there was no point traveling the Ways faint with hunger.

Jerra’s bacon sandwiches were even better than his cheesy bean soup. As Tod ate, a feeling of dread crept over her at the thought of going back into the Ways. But it was her duty, she told herself, and she must do it.

Breakfast over, Tod helped put the Hub to rights, leaving it tidy for the next Watch. She tried her best to look relaxed, but inside she felt like a coiled spring wound up tight—ready to run as soon as she got the opportunity. At last it came, with the thud of purposeful footsteps crossing the room above. The next Watch had arrived.

Jerra grinned. “Bang on time,” he said. “I would expect no less.” Jerra picked up the Way Book—where all travelers through the Hub were logged—in order to hand it over. Ferdie asked to see it and Oskar, always curious, peered over his twin’s shoulder as she leafed through, looking at the descriptions of the occasional traveler wandering the Ways.

Tod took her chance. She slipped over to Way IV, drew back the bolts, and as Jerra turned around she was through the door and running. Far behind her, unheard by Tod, came Dan Moon’s cheery voice as he hurried down the steps into the Far Hub.

As soon as Tod ran into the **Vanishing Point**, the acrid, eerie smell of sulfur invaded her nostrils. She hesitated for a moment, then forced herself to go

on. This was her last chance to get to the Castle. If she did not take it, Septimus would know nothing of the danger until the Wizard Tower collapsed. At least if she managed to get to him he could evacuate the Tower and save the lives of hundreds of people.

Despite the weird smell, the **Vanishing Point** appeared to be still working. The mist closed behind her and as ever, Tod felt as though she was moving forward at breathtaking speed. All was as it should be, she told herself. Any minute now she would walk out of the mist and see the shape of the **Hidden** arch in the Castle Wall before her. And then her direction of travel shifted, and instead of going forward, she was falling. Down, down, down she fell, slowly like a leaf, twisting as she went, supported by the Wild Way Wind—until suddenly it disappeared and she dropped like a stone. Seconds later, the ground seemed to come up and hit her.

In the Far Hub, Dan Moon found three Sarns staring at the open door to Way VII. They looked shocked.

“Morning, all,” said Dan cheerily. “Typical. I’ve just missed the only excitement for the next three days. Well, rather them than me down that unstable Way.”

“Jeez,” Jerra said, still staring at the door. “I can’t believe she did that.”

“Who? Did what?” Dan asked.

“Tod. **Went Through** Way VII,” Jerra said.

“Tod?” Dan looked blank.

“Your Alice, Dan. She just took off.”

“Tod was *here*?”

“Until a few seconds ago, yes.”

“So why did she go?” Dan asked, staring at the open door.

“There’s bad stuff happening in the Ways, Dan,” Jerra said. “And she wanted to go and tell Septimus at the Castle.”

“Go back to Septimus? Even though I was coming?” Dan sounded hurt.

“I didn’t tell her you were doing the next Watch,” Jerra said. “I wanted it to be a fun surprise. Stupid idea, obviously.”

Dan went over to the open door to Way VII. He turned to Jerra with a worried look. “This Way smells weird to me. I don’t like it. I’m going after her.”

Jerra expected no less from Dan. “Hurry, Dan,” he said. “If there’s a Way Wind blowing through, then with any luck you can catch the same one as Tod.”

“Let’s hope so,” Dan said, already through the door.

Silently, Jerra, Ferdie and Oskar watched the tall, wiry figure of Dan Moon run along the Way and disappear into the white mist of the **Vanishing Point**.

Winded, Tod lay in pitch darkness, coughing and spluttering. She had landed heavily in what felt like a deep pile of soft sand. As her breath returned, she gingerly tried out each arm and leg in turn. They seemed to work, so she found her **FlashLight** in her pocket and switched it on, to reveal nothing but a thick cloud of gray dust.

Tod had just got to her feet when there was a loud thud behind her. She spun around and to her amazement saw Dan Moon lying facedown in the dust. “Dad!” she gasped. “Dad, Dad!” She threw herself down beside Dan, coughing as clouds of dust swirled up into the air.

Dan Moon did not bounce as well as he used to, he woozily told Tod as he struggled to sit up. Tod told him that she didn’t care about how well he bounced; she was just so pleased he was here.

“Well, Alice,” Dan began, but stopped as he was overcome by a fit of coughing. Tod’s smile faded. Dan only called her Alice when he was cross with her. Dan fought down his cough and continued. “I can’t say that *I* am pleased to be here. Whatever were you thinking of, running into an unstable Way?”

“Dad, the Ways are crumbling fast and I had to warn Septimus. I didn’t want to go, but it’s my job now. You know that.”

“Of course I know that.” Dan paused for another coughing fit. “But you mustn’t go putting yourself in danger. Septimus would never expect that, not *ever*.”

Tod knew Dan did not understand. “But *Dad*,” she said, “this is really, *really* bad. The whole Wizard Tower could collapse at any moment. And kill everyone in it.”

Dan shook his head. “A few unstable Ways aren’t going to make that happen,” he said. But Tod knew better. She scooped up a handful of the fine

gray dust they had landed in and held it out to Dan. “Dad, this is lapis lazuli.”

Dan frowned. “What do you mean?” he asked.

But Tod had no time to reply. A violent eddy threw her toward Dan. He caught her and, clutching each other, Dan Moon and his daughter were dragged into a vortex of dust. Like butterflies in a hurricane, they were sucked up into the very center of a Wild Way Wind.

WINDED

Inside Way VII, as close to the **Vanishing Point** as he dared go, Jerra waited, lantern in hand.

Watching him anxiously from the doorway were Ferdie and Oskar, who were under strict instructions not to take even one step into the Way. “Can you see anything?” Oskar asked, his voice echoing along the tunnel.

“*Shh*, Oskie,” Jerra hissed. “I’m trying to listen, okay?” In the distance somewhere deep inside the Way came an eerie sound like someone blowing across the top of a bottle, and Jerra thought he could see a few eddies inside the white mist of the **Vanishing Point**. As he held his lantern higher to get a better look, Tod and Dan came barreling out of the mist and knocked him flying. Jerra hit his head on the tunnel wall and Tod and Dan fell in a heap on top of him.

Oskar and Ferdie raced toward the pile of bodies. They pulled Dan and Tod to their feet, but Jerra did not move. Taking one limb apiece, they carried him out of the tunnel and lowered him gently onto the cushions in the Hub.

“Jerra! Jerra!” Ferdie said, patting her brother’s face none too gently.

“Werrr?” Jerra moaned. He blinked and tried to focus. Two people were speaking at once, and they both looked like Ferdie.

“Jerra!” Ferdie said. “It’s okay, Jerra. Tod and Dan are safe and you hit your head.” She could see a large egg-shaped bump coming up on Jerra’s forehead.

While Jerra lay woozily on the cushions, Tod explained to Dan about the crumbing of the lapis lazuli. She told him everything that had happened,

except, for Oskar's sake, the fact that Septimus thought the Ormlet had died.

Dan listened quietly and calmly. When at last Tod stopped speaking, he said, "It's bad for the Castle; I can see that. But the Ways have brought nothing but trouble to our village. I think it will be a good thing for us."

Tod was aghast. "But we're PathFinders," she said. "The Ways are part of our history. We can't let them fall to pieces as if they don't matter anymore. Because they do matter—to all kinds of people, all over the world."

"Perhaps," Dan said. "But there is nothing we can do, is there?"

"We're PathFinders," Tod repeated stubbornly. "There must be something we can do. There *must* be."

"I can't think what," Dan said.

Jerra opened his eyes. He blinked hard to get rid of the second Tod, sat up and said, "*The Path*. We found it when we were rebuilding the village. Hidden under the bell. There might be something there."

"Lie down, Jerra," Oskar said gently. His brother seemed worryingly confused with his talk of a path hidden under the bell.

"I won't lie down, Oskie," Jerra said indignantly. "Dan knows all about *The Path*, don't you, Dan?"

"Not really," Dan said somewhat grumpily. "Your mother has custody of it."

"Well, Tod, you should ask Mum to show you," Jerra said.

"Show me a path?" asked Tod.

"What *path*?" Oskar and Ferdie demanded.

"Where does it go?" asked Tod.

Jerra closed his eyes. It seemed way too complicated to explain.

"You're tiring Jerra," Dan said.

"No, she's not," Jerra said. "Dan, I'm serious. Take Tod to Mum. Let her see *The Path*. I can easily do your Watch for you."

"Jerra, you can't," Ferdie said. "You banged your head really hard. You need to rest. Me and Oskie will do your Watch."

Jerra looked up at Ferdie and then had to do his best not to seem dizzy. "You will not," he told her. "You are way too young."

"Oskie and I are very nearly grown up," Ferdie said. "We'll be going to the MidSummer Circle soon."

This was a MidSummer meeting where all PathFinders between the ages of twelve and sixteen learned the secrets of their history. The first attendance at the MidSummer Circle was the moment when a Pathfinder was considered to come of age.

“But you’ve not been *yet*,” Jerra pointed out. He looked up at Dan. “I shall be fine here, despite my annoying little sister.”

Ferdie stuck her tongue out at Jerra.

Jerra laughed. “Not so grown-up now, Ferd,” he said. He turned to Tod. “*The Path* would make sense to you; go and have a look. Dan, take her. I’ll be fine.”

Tod caught a hint of urgency in Jerra’s words, which contrasted with the distinct lack of urgency on Dan’s part. “I’ll go right now,” she said. “You stay with Jerra, Dad.”

But Dan was not prepared to let his daughter go through the Far on her own. And Jerra, although very pale—apart from an angry red bruise on his forehead—was clearly well enough to joke with Ferdie. So Dan accepted Jerra’s offer to take his Watch, told Ferdie and Oskar to look after their brother and set off with Tod on the long walk home.

HOMeward BOUND

Dan and Tod followed the well-worn track that took them through the Far forest. The Far felt much less threatening than the Castle Forest; there were no lurking witches, and the only animals Tod saw were two elusive wood voles. But the light was dim, the trees clustered close, and Tod looked forward to being out in the sunlight and seeing the sand dunes of her home village and the sparkling sea beyond.

They set a fast pace, and as they went Tod told Dan all the things she had done since she last saw him. Dan listened happily, thinking how much she reminded him of his dear Cassi. Tod was careful not to mention the dangers of the last few months, but there was one thing that was playing on her mind, and it was not until they reached the outskirts of the forest where the shadows were lifting that Tod felt brave enough to mention it.

“I saw Aunt Mitza,” she said.

Dan stopped dead. “Mitza? Where?”

“Um. When I was in the desert, getting the Orm Egg.”

Dan frowned. “I hope you kept out of her way.”

“I did.” Tod twisted her gold-and-silver snake ring that had once belonged to her mother. “But she said something. About Mum.”

“Mum?” Dan was taken aback. “Mum” was not a word he and Tod often used. Cassi had been gone so long now.

“Mum,” Tod said again, claiming the word for her own. She told Dan how Aunt Mitza had implied that she had sent the sand fly that had killed Cassi TodHunter Draa. Dan stopped dead. He looked shaken. “She . . . she did that? To my Cassi? To your mother? She sent a lethal sand fly?”

Tod nodded. “In an envelope of sand.”

Dan felt sick. He remembered Mitza’s letter to Cassi—which had puzzled them both, for Mitza was no great writer of letters—and its envelope full of sand. How he and Cassi had laughed at it. *Silly, clumsy Mitza*, they had said, *always so messy*. The thought that if Cassi hadn’t opened the letter she might have been here with him and her daughter almost overwhelmed Dan.

“And then,” Tod said, “Aunt Mitza told me to be careful. As though . . . as though she . . . she was planning something. For *me*.”

Dan looked horrified.

“And the thing is, Dad, yesterday two travelers came through the Hub. They looked kind of weird, as though there was some **Darke Magyk** on them. One of them was Aunt Mitza. I’m sure of it. And she went through Way Seven. To the Castle.”

Now Dan understood. “To find you. Like she threatened. Thank goodness you are not there, Tod.” Dan shook his head. “I will not allow that woman to blight our lives any longer. I’m going to the Castle. I’m going to track her down and make sure she never tries to hurt you again. *Ever*.”

“But Dad,” Tod said. “We can’t get to the Castle, can we? Not anymore. Well, not through the Ways.”

“I’ll go by sea,” Dan said.

“By the time you get there, there might not be a Castle left,” Tod said sadly. As they neared the last trees of the Far, Tod said, “I don’t think Mitza can do me any harm while I’m an Apprentice and have the power of the

Wizard Tower behind me. But if that all goes, Mitza has to find me eventually. I don't think she will give up."

Dan was silent. He suspected his daughter was right.

"Dad, I so wish . . ." Tod stopped. What she wished seemed impossible.

"What do you wish, Alice?" Dan asked, using his serious name for her.

"I wish I could help protect the Castle. And the Ancient Ways. And all those beautiful places like the SnowPlains that are crumbling to dust . . . I so wish I could stop it from happening."

Dan and Tod walked out of the Far into the afternoon sun. They took the boarded track that wound through the sand dunes and headed toward the outlying houses of the village, standing tall on their four stilts, looking as though they were striding across the dunes. Tod smiled. Houses on stilts meant she was home.

They headed toward the center of the village where the houses, which still smelled of fresh timber and tar, were newly built after having been set on fire by Oraton-Marr's men. People were still adding the final touches, hammering up shutters, finishing the thatch. As they walked toward the new central space, where the old PathFinder bell now hung, Tod said, "I'll just stop by and see Rosie like Jerra said."

"Ah, yes. *The Path*," Dan said, still sounding unenthusiastic, Tod thought.

The path puzzled Tod. Why did it make her father so grumpy? And why was Rosie looking after it? Rosie was not someone you would ask to keep a path swept clean and tidy. She was one of the village's cleverer, more bookish people. In fact, the old Sarn house had had a whole room full of Rosie's books—before it burned down.

The Sarns' house was a surprise to Tod. In her mind it was still the raggedy thatched, scruffy old house. This one was so new that the wood was pale and not yet painted with tar, the thatch was bright yellow and the windows sparkling clean. But some things did not change. At the top of the ladder, through the open door, Tod saw the familiar figure of Rosie Sarn sitting at the long kitchen table, reading.

The next moment, in response to Tod's call, Rosie was at the doorway. She saw Dan and her hands went to her mouth in fear. "Dan, what's happened? Why aren't you on Watch? Where's Jerra?"

"Jerra's fine, Rosie. He's resting, he had a bit of a bump to his head."

“Oh no!”

“Really, Rosie, Jerra is absolutely okay, I would not have left him otherwise. And besides, Ferdie and Oskar have Come Through and they’re with him.”

Rosie broke into a smile. “Ferdie and Oskar! Oh, how wonderful.” Rosie now spotted Tod standing a little behind Dan. “And Tod too!” she said. “Goodness, you’ve grown. How lovely to see you. Come on up, both of you.”

And so Tod and Dan climbed the ladder up to the Sarns’ welcoming kitchen. At the top, Tod turned and gazed at the village spread out before her. The Castle felt a long, long way away.

SECRETS

Ten minutes later Tod was sitting at Rosie’s kitchen table looking at one of the most beautiful books she had ever seen. Bound in green leather with swirling silver patterns enclosing its gold-blocked title: *The Path*.

“Jerra found it when he was digging new foundations for the bell tower,” Rosie told her. “About six feet down one of the spades hit a metal box. You can imagine how excited he was. All those legends about buried treasure under the bell—they were true.”

“I wish I’d been there,” Tod said wistfully.

“You’d not have seen much, Tod. Word got around and soon the whole village was there, trying to get a glimpse. Anyway, Jerra pulled up the box, got some bolt cutters and we opened it. There were a few sighs of ‘Oh dear, it’s only a book,’ but I thought it was the best treasure we could wish for.” Rosie’s eyes were shining with excitement. “Because Jerra had found it, he was given the choice of where it should go for now. So he said I was good with books and should look after it for the village. Everyone agreed and we took it home. But late that night, three of the Inner Circle came knocking on the door demanding we hand it over to them. They got very unpleasant when we refused.”

“We wanted to keep it safe,” Dan said. “That was all.”

“Dad, were you one of those three people?” Tod asked, shocked.

“I was,” Dan admitted. “I was only doing my best for our village. But Rosie thought she knew better.”

“Our history belongs to us all, Dan. Despite what some people think,” Rosie retorted, looking accusingly at Dan.

Dan sighed. “Rosie, some things are too dangerous for us all to know.”

Rosie gave a snort of derision. “We are not children, Dan Moon,” she said.

Dan said nothing and there was an awkward silence. Eventually Tod ventured, “Er. Can I have a look at it? Please?”

“Tod, of course you may,” Rosie said. “I’ve been so looking forward to showing you.”

Tod was touched by Rosie’s words and she wanted to share something in return. She took the StarChaser from around her neck and held it out to show Rosie. “This is something to do with our village too,” she said. “What do you think it might be?”

But it wasn’t Rosie who answered; it was Dan. “Goodness,” he exclaimed. “A pod key! Where did you get that?”

“A *pod key*?” asked Tod. “It’s called a StarChaser. It’s a **Charm**. I got it from the **Charm** Library.”

“Ah, well, that’s what it is. Of course it is,” Dan said hurriedly. “A **Charm**.”

“So why did you call it a pod key?” Tod asked, puzzled.

“I, um, I shouldn’t have said that,” Dan said.

“Another of those Inner Circle enigmas, I suppose,” Rosie said scathingly.

Dan sighed. He had had this conversation with Rosie Sarn many times.

Tod didn’t understand. “But I thought we heard all the secrets at the Summer Circle,” she said.

“Well, you don’t,” Rosie said tersely. “The Inner Circle keeps some for itself.”

“What *is* the Inner Circle?” Tod asked.

“That is a question for your father,” Rosie said.

Dan looked uncomfortable. “It’s just some PathFinders, Tod, who are trusted to know all our secrets.”

“So do *you* know our secrets, Dad?” Tod persisted.

“Yes,” Dan admitted. “I do.”

“Does that mean you can read *The Path*?”

Dan shook his head. “No. No one understands the ancient texts anymore.”

“But I am sure you could make a pretty good guess about what is in it,” Rosie said.

“Could you, Dad?” asked Tod.

Dan shrugged. “I truly don’t know what is in *The Path*, Tod. What Rosie calls ‘our secrets’ are just myths and legends, no more than that. I really don’t know why Rosie makes such a fuss about it.”

Rosie let out an exasperated splutter. “Because they are *secret*. And secrets destroy a society, Dan. Secrets create two tribes of people: those who know and those who don’t. And eventually, two tribes living side by side will fight.”

“Rosie, I don’t want to fight,” Dan said wearily, “really, I don’t. Let’s go and sit in the garden and let Tod look at *The Path*. I’ll tell you all about Jerra. And Oskar and Ferdie too.”

That was a peace offering that Rosie could not refuse. She made a jug of Barley Cup and then she and Dan took it down to the newly planted garden and sat in the sun.

Meanwhile, at Rosie’s kitchen table, Tod embarked upon her solitary journey along *The Path*.

A DASH AND A SICKLE

One of Tod’s courses at the Wizard Tower was Palaeography and Ciphers—known by all who were required to attend as “Pale and Sick” due to the deathly pallor of the teacher, a pedantic elderly Wizard who spoke in a low, flat drone that made everything, however interesting, seem tedious. But now Tod saw the point of all those boring afternoons—to her delight, she recognized the script *The Path* was written in. It was EAV:B or, to give it its full name, Eastern Arcane Vernacular, version B. With its typical thick black script, its use only of symbols with double dots after each symbol, it was one of the easier scripts to identify.

Tod knew about twenty symbols from EAV:B. She knew colors, including lapis lazuli—a dash enclosed by a sickle curve—some numbers, and a few other random words. At once she set about trying to find the symbol for lapis. Methodically, Tod ran her index finger along each line, checking every symbol, but she could not find it. She had reached the very last block of text in the book and was feeling quite despondent when her finger stopped at a dash enclosed by a sickle curve. But it was the symbol right next to it that made her heart race. It was an ovoid with a large dot in the center: *Egg*.

Tod's finger trembled as it traced its way through the dark forest of letters until, like a lantern shining in the shadows, she saw the two symbols side by side once more—and then again and *again*. Now Tod knew she was onto something. This was about a lapis egg, there was no doubt about it. Tod also noted the plus symbol that was combined with the ovoid, which she remembered made the symbol plural. This was about *more than one egg*.

With memories of the Pale and Sick Wizard droning: “Method, method, *method*, Apprentice,” Tod decided to write down in sequence every symbol she recognized. She went back to the top of the page and examined the title. It looked like a fish with big, solid fins and it put her in mind of something Oskar would make: a metal fish. She decided to name the symbol exactly that. And so, headed by Metal Fish, Tod began to write a list of words. By the time she got to the end of the block of text, this is what she had: Metal Fish. Lapis Eggs. Yellow. Three. Metal Fish. Lapis Eggs. Wurm. Zero. Sorrow. Metal Fish. Home. Sea. Sorrow.

Tod looked at her list and she knew she had found something very important. She jumped up, raced down to the garden and thrust the list at Dan. “Dad, look! There's lapis here. And *eggs*. It must be Orm Eggs, it *must* be!”

Reluctantly, Dan took the list. He frowned.

“Dad,” Tod said, “if this looks like one of those secret legends, please tell us what it is. Because if there are Orm Eggs in the secret, then it might show us a way to save the Wizard Tower. And the Ancient Ways.”

Dan's face remained studiously blank; it seemed to Tod that he was shutting her out. For comfort—for it was very uncomfortable to see this unknown side of her father—Tod put her hand in her pocket and closed it

around the **PathFinder**. A moment later she snatched her hand from her pocket. “No!” she yelled. “No!”

“Tod?” Dan asked anxiously.

Wordlessly, Tod held out her hand. Lying on her palm was her precious **PathFinder**. Its gold-and-silver filigree shone in the sunlight. But at its very center was an empty socket: the dome of lapis lazuli was gone, leaving only its enclosing silver ring.

Tod handed the blind **PathFinder** to Dan, then she put her hand back in her pocket, drew it out and sprinkled a fine stream of gray dust onto her list. “Dad,” Tod said. “This is the lapis from my **PathFinder**—*our PathFinder*, the one that belongs to our family. If you know something that might stop this from happening, you have to tell me. You *have* to.”

Dan traced his finger through the dust and looked up at Tod and Rosie. There was a story he had to tell and he would tell it. But it frightened him. Not the telling of the story, but what he knew Tod would insist on doing once she had heard it.

And so, with a feeling of dread, Dan began to speak.

THE METAL FISH

“Tod, the symbol you call the metal fish must be the symbol for the *PathFinder*. I don’t mean your guide to the Ancient Ways, but the *PathFinder* you heard about in MidSummer Circle last year: the starship that once took our people to the stars and back. Part of the mission was to find a new planet where we could create powerful **Magyk**. People then had the crazy idea that an abundance of lapis lazuli would give great **Magykal** powers.”

“But that’s not crazy, Dad, that’s true!” Tod said.

“Yes, so it seems. Anyway, the idea was to turn an entire planet into lapis lazuli and then set up a colony on it. There were a few people on board with **Magykal** power—you are descended from them, Tod. It is where your gift is from. These people, who were called shamans, would do great things on this planet. It would be, I suppose, a **Magykal** laboratory. So an important part of the *PathFinder*’s cargo was Orm Eggs.”

Tod listened, rapt.

“It took many generations to gather them, but at last the *PathFinder* left with twelve Orm Eggs on board. After countless measures of time, they found what seemed to be a suitable planet. It was the right size and consisted of a soft yellow rock, perfect for burrowing Orms. All three shamans decided to go down to check it out. They came back with good reports and so, one by one, they began to take the Orm Eggs down to the planet. Because a human hatching of an Orm is difficult, they tried it with one Egg first. It was successful. The larval Orm developed as it should and began to eat its way through the rock. One by one, the Orm Eggs were sent down, hatched and set to work. On board the orbiting ship the PathFinders watched enthralled while below the yellow planet turned slowly blue and the shamans began to build a tower—as shamans will.

“The days and nights were long on this planet, each lasting seven of our days. The very last Egg was due to be flown down when, as the band of twilight moved across the planet and day began at last to dawn, the watchers on the *PathFinder* ship were horrified. The shamans’ tower was gone and in its place was a great pit, and curled at the bottom of the pit was a giant yellow worm. They sent a pod down to see what had happened but it never returned. And so, in great sorrow, the PathFinders decided to come home.

“As you know from the MidSummer Circle, our homecoming was not a happy one. This is true. But what is not true is that the *PathFinder* landed on the spot where the village bell now is. It actually crashed into the sea.”

“So the people from the Trading Post didn’t take the PathFinders prisoner after all?” Tod asked, thinking that all on board must have been killed.

“Oh, they did that, all right,” Dan said. “The *PathFinder* landed on the seabed intact and many managed to escape. They walked home, following the rising seabed.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Tod said.

“It was,” Dan agreed. “Legend has it that you can still see the path they made along the seabed. It didn’t do them much good, sadly. When at last the PathFinders struggled up the beach, weighed down by their space suits, they were attacked by the Trading Post people who had taken over our village. Many were killed and the survivors taken prisoner. Terrible.”

Rosie was still in a combative mood. “Well, Dan, you can understand it. They see a fireball coming down from the sky and then strange creatures walking out of the sea. They must have been terrified.”

Dan did not agree. “What I don’t understand is why they kept our people imprisoned in the Far Fortress for so many generations. So cruel.”

Rosie could not disagree with that. But there were still things Rosie had to say. “And what *I* don’t understand, Dan Moon, is why this amazing story is a secret. We should be proud of what our ancestors did.”

“Rosie, think about it,” Dan said. “First you tell a bunch of young teens that one in ten of them have gills and can walk underwater, and then you tell them there is a path under the sea that leads to our old *PathFinder* starship. Who, at the age of twelve, could resist the temptation to walk into the sea to explore that ship? It is easy to find; the old white post on the Circle beach marks the spot. Every year there would be some who would walk straight into the sea and never come home. We would lose virtually all our children.”

Rosie sighed. “You are right, Dan. The bravest and best would go.”

Tod felt the anger between Rosie and Dan melt away. “And that, Rosie,” Dan said, “is exactly what happened. The bravest and best *did* go. This story was not always a secret. In the days when many more of us had gills, there used to be guided expeditions to the ship on MidSummer’s Eve. One year they did not return. Worried villagers set out to see what was wrong and found the sea above the starship red with blood.”

Rosie and Tod gasped.

“A brave villager went down, only to discover a nightmare. A great hole had been punched in the side of the ship and a horrendous beast was devouring what was left of our beautiful children. The generation was decimated. Our ancestors swore never again to visit the *PathFinder*, but to leave it as a sacred place. They decided to keep it secret to avoid any danger of others being devoured by the beasts that now lived there.”

Dan stared down at the dusty list still in his hands, waiting for what he knew would come.

“Dad,” Tod said. “That story means there is still an Orm Egg on board the *PathFinder*.”

“Yes. It does,” Dan agreed with a heavy heart.

Tod held up her silver star. “And you said this was a . . . a *pod key*?”

“I did,” Dan said.

“A pod on the starship?”

Dan nodded.

“*An Orm Egg pod?*” Tod asked.

“I have no idea,” Dan said. “I am not proposing to find out. And neither, Alice, are you.”

Tod was silent.

“Promise me,” Dan said, looking Tod in the eye, “that you will *not* go —”

But a sudden sound of pounding feet and the appearance of Oskar stopped Dan midsentence. Rosie leaped up. “Oskar! Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

“Jerra . . .” Oskar puffed. “Jerra went to sleep and he won’t wake up.”

Dan was on his feet at once. “I knew I shouldn’t have left him. I’ll go straightaway.”

“You’re not going alone,” Rosie said. “Jonas will go with you. And Annar. I’ll go and find them.” Dan did not object. He had had enough of arguing with Rosie.

Rosie, Tod and Oskar spent an anxious afternoon. Rosie planted endless rows of winter kale. Oskar did what he always did when he was upset: he went out snake tracking. And Tod tracked Orm Eggs.

To the rhythmic sound of Rosie’s digging, Tod went over every detail of *The Path*. Her persistence paid off, for tucked inside the back cover she found a folded diagram. As Tod smoothed it out on the kitchen table, a thrill of excitement ran through her. It was the Metal Fish—the *PathFinder* starship. She ran her finger over the lines, looking for something that she knew no one else would have searched for: an ovoid with a dot in the middle. Tod made a bargain with herself: if she didn’t find the symbol, she would do as Dan had told her. She was still looking when from the garden below she heard Rosie greeting Oskar and Oskar offering to help make supper. Tod knew that once Oskar was in the kitchen she would not be able to think straight. He would be chatting to her and wanting her to explain things. If she didn’t find what she was looking for now, she never would. In a last burst of concentration, Tod scanned the diagram looking for shapes rather than meaning. As she heard Rosie telling Oskar to wash his hands in

the outside sink, something caught her eye: distorted and made faint by a crease of the fold there were two circles, one within the other, and in the middle was a central dot. Tod felt a shiver of excitement run through her—could this be an Orm Egg inside a pod? The more she looked, the more she was convinced it was. There was the last pod, deep in the tail section of the starship, *just waiting for her to go and get it.*

TRIBE OF THREE

There was a preoccupied atmosphere in Rosie Sarn's kitchen as supper was prepared. Rosie's and Oskar's thoughts were with Jerra, and Tod could not get the image of the Orm Egg out of her head. While Oskar filleted the fish and Rosie put together a pot of vegetables, Tod laid the table—all the while casting glances at the wooden box on top of the shelf where *The Path* now lay with its secrets locked within.

They were sitting down at the table and Rosie was pouring out a jug of her smashed-fruit juice—which Tod loved—when they heard a voice call up from below, “Mum!”

Rosie went pale. She leaped to her feet and ran to the door. “Ferdie! Oh, Ferdie, what is it?”

Ferdie came running up the ladder and threw herself into the room. “It's all right, Mum!” she said, trying to catch her breath. “Dan told me to come home so you didn't worry. Jerra's okay. Annar gave him some stuff . . . don't know what . . . but he woke up.”

Rosie sank down onto the nearest chair. “Oh, Ferdie. Oh, thank goodness. And you came all that way on your own.”

“Mum,” Ferdie said, “I am perfectly capable of walking through the Far.”

Tod suppressed a smile. Ferdie sounded just like Lucy Heap.

Rosie caught the new confidence in her daughter. “I suppose you are, dear,” she said.

Oskar heard the weariness in his mother's voice. “Mum,” he said, “after supper you are going to bed and we are doing the clearing-up.”

Rosie smiled at her twins, amused but touched at the role reversal. “All right,” she said meekly. “I think I might just do that.”

Tod helped the twins wash up and lay everything out for breakfast, then they took a lantern and went to sit out in the warm summer evening. It was everything Tod had dreamed of during the long winter in the Castle and the tedious hours spent in lectures in the Wizard Tower: the smell of warm sand, the whisper of the breeze through the dune grasses and the distant sound of the waves falling upon the beach like a regular heartbeat.

But Tod’s thoughts were distracted. There was something she wanted to talk to Ferdie and Oskar about, but she knew how voices traveled upward, and Rosie’s bedroom window was right above them, wide-open to catch the evening breeze. Tod stood up and casually said, “I haven’t seen the sea yet. Shall we go to the beach?”

It was a beautiful night. The moon was rising and the sea glittered darkly through the gap in the dunes. The tide was low, and as they walked out of the dunes a wide swathe of perfectly smooth sand was stretched before them, the strip beside the dark water shining like a satin ribbon. As they made their way down the soft sand at the foot of the dunes, Tod was surprised to hear Ferdie say, “So, what’s up, Tod?”

Tod smiled. “How can you tell, Ferd?” she asked.

“You’ve been scratchy all evening,” Ferdie said as they wandered slowly toward the sea. “And when Dan arrived at the Hub he seemed kind of scratchy too. And he kept calling you Alice. Have you two had an argument?”

Tod sighed. “Kind of,” she said. “There’s something I want to do and Dad doesn’t want me to do it.”

“They get like that sometimes,” Oskar said. “It’s really annoying. When I wanted to go to the Manuscriptorium, Dad said no for days before Mum made him say yes.”

“But this is different,” Tod said. “This is . . .” She stopped. She was going to say *really important*, but she knew that Oskar would not take that well. “This is really *weird*,” she said. She looked at them. “Tribe of Three?” she said.

Ferdie and Oskar knew at once what Tod meant: that whatever Tod was going to say was between the three of them only. “Tribe of Three,” Ferdie and Oskar replied.

They wandered along the shoreline and Tod told them about the Orm Egg that lay not so very far away beneath the sea. But she did not tell them everything—she did not mention the beasts in the starship. She was afraid that if she did, Ferdie and Oskar would beg her not to go. And Tod realized that she had already made up her mind—she was going to get that Orm Egg, whatever her friends said. But she would rather go with their support than without it.

When she finished there was silence, unbroken but for the *swish-swash* of the wavelets lapping at their feet, while they looked out over the moonlit ocean, thinking about its secrets below. Tod was determined not to speak first. She knew what she wanted her friends to say, but it had to come from them.

“You have to do it,” Ferdie said. “You have to go and get the Egg.”

A wave of relief washed over Tod. “Yes,” she said, “I do.”

“We’ll help you,” Ferdie said.

“We’ll do anything we can,” Oskar said. He looked at Tod. “I’d love to come too,” he said. “Swimming down under the water to see our starship. Wow . . . what a thing.”

“Oskie,” Tod said. “You know you can’t find out whether you have gills without risking being drowned. There is no way you can come down with me. *No way at all.*”

“So you say,” Oskar said.

“Oskar Sarn, do not even *think* about it,” Tod told him sternly.

“Yes, miss,” Oskar said, and stuck his tongue out at Tod.

They retreated to the dunes to watch the tide come in and discuss their plans. As the water crept up the beach, clouds drifted across the moon, and the air grew colder, the frightening reality of what she had decided to do began to dawn upon Tod.

Late that night in Ferdie’s room while the house was quiet with the sounds of sleeping, Tod asked Ferdie to show her how to unpick the stitches in a soft leather ball and then sew it back up again so that it would still bounce. Bing was to go on a mission. If she found the Orm Egg—which Tod hardly dared hope for—then they would need a way of getting it to the Eastern SnowPlains. And she had an idea how to do it.

While Ferdie opened a small gap in Bing's tiny, tight stitching, Tod explained that she wanted to send a message inside the ball. Ferdie grinned and produced from her pocket a length of white string. "Message string," she said, and handed it to Tod.

"Huh?" asked Tod.

"It's William's favorite game," Ferdie explained. "We send secret messages in string. Here, I'll show you."

Instructed by Ferdie, Tod untwisted the string and on one of the strands wrote a short message to Septimus and then allowed the string to twist back into shape. Ferdie threaded the string inside the ball, and while Tod held the edges together, Ferdie stitched them, leaving a tiny bit of string poking out. "To show there is a message there," Ferdie said.

At last they went to bed. Tod wrapped Bing in the handkerchief Septimus had given her after they had laid the Ormlet to rest. Then she put the **Tracker** ball under her pillow and fell quickly asleep. She slept fitfully, dreaming that she had an Orm Egg under her pillow.

GONE FISHING

Early the next morning they left Rosie a note to say they were going fishing, and set off to the beach. They pulled Dan's small, open boat named *Vega* down to the waterline and began to load up.

Tod put in a lightweight fishing net, a long rope, Dan's fishing weights and her **FlashLight**. In her pocket was Bing, primed and ready to go. Oskar added his own bag of "stuff," as he called it, and Ferdie a picnic basket.

"Okay," Tod said. "Let's go."

Because *Vega* had to follow a precise path, Tod had decided to row rather than sail. They took *Vega* along the shoreline, over the sand spit to the beach where the MidSummer Circle took place. It was here an old white painted post stood, battered and unremarked, its lower part now underwater. Tod looked at the post with new eyes. "There it is!" she said, pointing it out to Ferdie and Oskar. "That's where they came ashore."

"And I thought it was just a boring old post," Oskar said. "Although I did wonder why every now and then someone bothered to paint it."

“So did I,” Tod said.

“But you must have found all that out last year in MidSummer Circle?” asked Ferdie.

“No,” Tod replied. “They didn’t tell us. Or rather, *Dad* didn’t tell us,” she added crossly. “Like he didn’t tell us lots of things.”

The MidSummer Circle beach could not be seen from the village, and because of the nearby shallows it was not used for fishing boats. It was empty and, that morning, felt a little desolate. As Ferdie and Oskar rowed closer, Tod began to feel nervous. What was she thinking of, walking into the sea to find an Orm Egg in a sunken starship? Was she totally crazy?

“All right, Tod?” Oskar interrupted her thoughts and then grunted as he struggled to pull his oar from too deep a plunge into the water—Oskar was not a natural rower.

Tod nodded. Her mouth felt too dry to speak.

They tied *Vega* up to the white post and the boat sat rocking gently in the morning sun. Ferdie opened the picnic basket and offered Tod a sandwich. Tod shook her head. She felt sick with nerves. Ferdie closed the basket. “We’ll have the picnic when you get back,” she said. “To celebrate.”

“We can use the Orm Egg as a table,” Oskar joked.

Tod tried to smile but did not succeed.

Ferdie hugged her. “We’ll be right here, all the time,” she said. “As near as we can possibly be.”

“Just look up and you’ll see us,” Oskar added. He rummaged in his bag of *stuff* and took out a pair of goggles. “For you,” he said, offering them to Tod. “You’ll be able to see so much clearer under the water.”

Tod broke into a smile. “Wow, thank you, Oskie,” she said. “They’re just perfect. They’ll make such a difference.”

Oskar grinned delightedly. “They’re Manuscriptorium goggles. I found them last night. I must have put them in my pocket and forgotten about them.”

“Well, I’m glad you did,” Tod said, putting the goggles on her head.

Tod began to get ready. She took Rose’s **Charm** bracelets out of her pocket and slipped them on. Helped by Ferdie and Oskar, she got into her waterproof all-in-one, which was tight over her three layers of fishing jumpers and woolen leggings. Then she put on a safety belt (normally worn in bad weather in order to fasten the occupant to the boat) and tied one end

of the rope to it, giving the other end to Ferdie. Ferdie solemnly took the rope and wrapped it around her hand to show Tod that there was no way she was going to let go.

Tod clambered out of the boat and suddenly remembered her message to Septimus. She retrieved the **Tracker** ball from her pocket. “**Find** Septimus. Go alone,” she told it. Then she threw Bing into the water.

“Will it go underwater?” Ferdie asked doubtfully.

“If I can, then I reckon a **Tracker** ball can too,” Tod said.

Ferdie peered over the side of the boat. “It’s doing it!” she said. “Running along the sand . . . going deeper . . . I hope a fish doesn’t eat it.”

Oskar hoped a fish didn’t eat *Tod*, but he knew better than to say so.

Tod was back on her mission. She checked her **Charm** bracelets were in place—these would help keep her warm in the chill of the water—then she put on her fishing vest and said tersely, “Weights, Oskie.”

One by one, Oskar handed over the lead weights. And Tod slipped them into various pockets, taking care to distribute them evenly. Then, with her feet sinking into the sand, she took out her **FlashLight** and switched the beam to its underwater setting. It shone pale green—almost invisible in the daylight, but perfect for beneath the sea. “Time to go,” she said.

“We’ll be with you every step of the way,” Oskar promised.

“I’ve got your rope,” Ferdie told her. “We can pull you up in seconds, can’t we, Oskie?”

“Yep, we can,” said Oskar.

They went over the code of rope tugs they had agreed on and then it was time to go. Tod managed a brief smile and gave the PathFinder sign for “okay”: an *O* formed by placing the tip of her index finger to the tip of her thumb. Oskar and Ferdie returned it. Then solemnly they watched their friend as she walked into the sea. They saw the water close over her dark hair, her elf-lock float briefly upon the surface, and then all trace of her was gone.



PART XI

TREADING THE PATH

As if in a dream, Tod walked along the gently sloping seabed, the weights keeping her feet easily on the sand. Rays of sunlight shone down through the water showing flashes of silver as small fish darted away. Tod moved slowly, looking out for the markers that would tell her she was on the right path. Visibility was not good: every step sent up fine clouds of sand that swirled about her. After negotiating her way around a small colony of rocks, Tod saw something that looked like an underwater tree. She headed toward it, and as she approached she realized with a thrill of excitement that it was the first of the marker posts, made not of wood like the one on the beach, but a smooth, dull, copper-colored metal, just like her StarChaser. The post was completely clear of barnacles and weeds, apart from a large frond attached to its top, which waved gently as if beckoning her onward.

Tod was jubilant: she had found the path! The path along which many hundreds of years ago her ancestors had trekked to safety, or so they had thought—and the path along which so many young PathFinders had once taken their last journey.

Resolutely, Tod pushed that last thought from her mind. She stopped beside the post and looked up at the thin snake of the rope glistening with air bubbles, rising to meet the dark underbelly of *Vega* some thirty feet above. The boat looked like a small whale, broad and tubby, and Tod felt a rush of affection for its plump solidity and for her friends within it, watching out for her. She gave a tug on the rope to let Ferdie know she had found a marker post, and in reply she saw the little pink flipper of Ferdie's hand break the surface and do an excited wave. Tod smiled. It was good to know she wasn't alone.

As the seabed sloped ever downward, the light level dropped, but to compensate for this, so did the intervals between the marker posts. Tod was impressed. It seemed to her that her ancestors had intended to make many trips back to their starship. Maybe, she thought, they were planning to

repair it, and to continue living in it under the sea. It was, after all, their home and had been their world for many generations.

Tod walked slowly onward, trying to imagine how it must have been to live one's entire life on a starship. At the very moment she was wondering what the *PathFinder* actually looked like, as if in reply to her thoughts, she saw a huge, dark shape ahead. At first sight it looked like a massive rock, but as she drew nearer, a pair of marker posts set together like a gateway told Tod it was much more than that. With a feeling of awe, she stepped between the posts.

Tod found herself standing on the edge of a pit. *This*, she thought, *is the crater that the PathFinder made when it crashed.* A swathe of goose bumps washed over her at the thought of what lay ahead. She looked up, hoping to see the underside of *Vega*, but she was too deep; all she saw was the darkness of water and the beam of her **FlashLight** fading before it reached the surface. She gave two tugs of the rope to show she had found the *PathFinder* and received two in reply. Then, with her heart beating fast, she set off, slipping and sliding down a steep drop toward the hull of the *PathFinder*: a massive carapace covered with clouded portholes, topped with battered fins and debris.

At the foot of the slope was an opening: a dark gash revealing layers of metal curling back like delicate fern fronds. On either side of this were the last two marker posts, topped with medusae—plantlike animals with long waving tendrils sporting delicate tufts on the ends. Tod stood for some moments on the threshold of the ship. She touched her **Charm** bracelets for luck—and to remind her of the Wizard Tower and why she was doing this—then she took a step forward. A tug on the rope as it caught on the metal told Tod that it was time to disconnect from her friends. She untied the rope from her belt, gave three tugs to warn Ferdie and fastened it to one of the marker posts.

Feeling utterly alone, she entered the home of her ancestors.

INTO THE METAL FISH

Tod felt as though she were in a sacred space. It reminded her of the Great Chamber of the Orm—the resting place of the last Orm Egg before it was stolen. There was a stillness, a sense of lives lived and lost. Keeping in her head the plan from *The Path*, Tod set off, walking over soft loose sand, which covered all kinds of strange lumps and bumps. Pushing away thoughts of the bones of the massacred PathFinders and the marauding beast that had killed them, Tod slowly wove her way through a forest of lattice uprights, heading toward the stern. The image of the Orm Egg waiting there in its pod drew her steadily onward.

Stepping slowly and carefully, painfully aware that she might well be treading on the remains of her ancestors beneath the sand, Tod traversed the cathedral-like space of the *PathFinder*. At last she came to a sheer face of metal on which swathes of medusae with long trailing fronds hung down and great clumps of goose barnacles popped their long necks out of their shells and eyeballed her. This, Tod was sure, must be the stern bulkhead of the starship.

From the starship plan, Tod knew the only entrance to the tail section was toward the top of the ship. She took out some of the fishing weights from her pockets, laid them on a rock and then pulled herself up on the slippery fronds. As Tod ascended the bulkhead, she realized that she was drifting through the *PathFinder* just as her ancestors had once done on their journey to the stars.

Tod was two-thirds up when her hand disappeared deep into a clump of medusae; she lost her balance, tumbled through the bulkhead and fell out the other side. She somersaulted twice, recovered her equilibrium and caught her water-laden breath in a gasp. Before her was a seemingly **Magykal** space, full of drifting green pinpoints of light wandering like lazy **Sprites**. She floated for some minutes, entranced at the sight until some of the “Sprites” began to float toward her. Tod’s delight rapidly faded as the “Sprites” drew near and she saw an army of bony teeth advancing upon her. The teeth belonged to tiny, vicious-looking fish, each of which dangled before its toothy open mouth a glowing green light. In moments, Tod was surrounded.

The fish swam slowly around her, regarding her with wide, unblinking eyes. It occurred to Tod that, with her **FlashLight**, the fish might be thinking that she was one of them. Taking courage from that, Tod dangled

the **FlashLight** before her and took a step forward. The forest of teeth parted respectfully to let the Big Fish pass through. Tod began to propel herself down through the tail section, her now devoted followers shadowing her every move. Halfway down, Tod saw a dark space in the hull: a hole cut neatly in the metal. Thinking that this might be an entrance to an Orm pod, she swam up to it and shone her **FlashLight** into the hole. To Tod's astonishment, the light showed something familiar, yet utterly unexpected—a tunnel into the rock ending in a watery, misty **Vanishing Point**. She knew at once that this must be one of the drowned Ancient Ways that Marwick had told her about. She wondered what would happen if one of the Sprite fish swam into it. Would it too travel the Way, maybe to end up floundering in a waterless Hub? She imagined piles of dead Sprite fish blocking up a tunnel and thought how wonderfully weird the Ways were—and how much she wanted them to stay that way. The presence of the Way made Tod feel much happier—if she got trapped, there was an easy exit. She took one more look at the **Vanishing Point**, eerily beautiful in the beam of the **FlashLight**, then continued her downward journey.

Not much farther down Tod reached what seemed to be the floor of the starship. Miserably, she stared down at the sand beneath her feet—where had the Orm pod gone? As if in reply, the beam of her **FlashLight** caught the bright orange section of a circle gleaming through the sand. Excitedly, Tod scuffed the sand away with her foot, which sent clouds up into the water and made it hard to see. Impatiently, she waited for the sand to settle, and as the view cleared she saw at her feet a wonderfully familiar symbol: a huge circle with a dot in the center: *Egg*. Tod did a leap of excitement and sent her acolytes swimming away in panic. *Egg*. She could hardly believe it.

Now all she had to do was get hold of it.

Tod ran her hands through the sand, feeling the outside of the pod. It was made of the same smooth coppery metal of the posts that had marked the underwater path and had repelled all attempts by crustaceans and weeds to attach themselves. Slowly, so as not to cloud her vision, Tod smoothed away the sand and before long found what she was looking for—a circular hatch, in the center of which was, to her delight, a star-shaped indentation with a familiar pattern of points. It was the mirror image of her StarChaser. It seemed that Dan was right: this really was a pod key.

Tod lifted the StarChaser from around her neck. Her hands trembling with excitement, she was about to place it into its lock when she became aware of a movement at the edge of her vision—her guard of Sprite fish had suddenly shot away in all directions. Thoughts of the ancient PathFinder monster flashed into her mind and Tod wheeled around.

At first she merely saw six red pinpoints of light, seemingly swimming in formation, but then her heart leaped in fear. Coming straight for her, guided by her green eyes—which shone big and bright with horror through her goggles—was the ten-foot-tall shape of a Kraan.

A CONTRAPTION

On board *Vega*, Ferdie and Oskar were growing concerned.

“She’s been in there for *ages*,” Ferdie said, giving another tug on the rope and getting no response. She looked at Oskar. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Oskie.”

Oskar had a bad feeling too. He picked up some fishing weights from the bottom of the boat and stuffed them into his pockets.

“Oskie, what are you *doing*?” Ferdie asked.

“I’m going down to see what’s going on,” Oskar said.

Ferdie went ashen. She grabbed hold of her brother with both hands. “No, Oskie, don’t,” she begged. “*Please don’t.*” Not so long ago, Ferdie had watched Tod throw herself into a fifty-foot-deep tube of water not knowing whether her friend would drown or not. She could not bear to watch Oskar doing the same.

Oskar hastened to reassure her. “Hey, Ferd, it’s okay. I’m not brave enough to do that,” he said. “Not like Tod.” Ferdie lost her look of terror—but not for long. Oskar was opening his mysterious bag of *stuff*. With the triumphant air of a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat, he took out what looked to Ferdie like a large oilcloth shopping bag with a small oval glass window and a canister with a crazy tangle of tubes dangling from it.

“I’m going to use this,” Oskar said, holding up the bag triumphantly.

“Use it to do what?” Ferdie asked.

“To breathe underwater,” Oskar told her. “Just like Tod. Ephaniah and I invented it,” he said proudly. “It works really well. I’ve made one for you, too. You’ll love it, Ferd.” With that Oskar put the bag over his head, put the end of one of the tubes in his mouth, tucked the canister up inside the bag and tightened the drawstring around his neck. Loud, rasping sounds began to come from Oskar’s bag-head.

Ferdie was horrified. “Oskar, take it off! You’ll suffocate!” she yelled, grabbing at the bag and trying to yank it off Oskar’s head.

“Nerrr, doppit Ferrrr!” Oskar pulled back from Ferdie, trying to protect his precious contraption. Desperately, Ferdie lunged forward; Oskar leaped backward, tripped over the thwart and tumbled out of the boat. There was a loud splash and Oskar sank fast.

Distraught, Ferdie leaned over the side of the boat and yelled, “Oskar! Oskar!” She saw a mass of bubbles coming up to the surface and the dark shape of Oskar dropping down into the depths. She felt the rope tighten as Oskar grabbed hold of it and relief washed over her—now Oskar could pull himself up. But Oskar did no such thing. Ferdie watched his dark, blurry shape with its big, white bag-head very deliberately continue its descent. She stared into the water until she could see him no more and then she sat down among the muddle of baskets and boxes, while the sea lapped against the sides and the boat gently rocked.

Ferdie could not bear it: to be alone in the boat while her twin brother and best friend were far below at the bottom of the sea was just not possible. She picked up Oskar’s horrible contraption and stared at it in disgust for a few seconds, breathing in the nauseating smell of the oiled canvas. Then Ferdie took a deep breath of fresh air and pulled the bag over her head. Just as she had seen Oskar do, she shoved the end of one of the tubes in her mouth, pushed the canister up into the bag and pulled the drawstring tight. She stared out through the little piece of glass at the world now shrunk to a green oval and forced herself to take a breath. With a *click* of a valve inside the canister and a metallic *hiss*, Ferdie took in her first gulp of air. It tasted rubbery and stale but it worked—she could actually breathe. Ferdie stood for a moment, gathering her courage, then she too took fishing weights from the basket, dropped them into her pockets, and without giving herself time to think, she held on to to her bag-head and jumped into the sea.

The cold shocked Ferdie, but the act of trying to breathe with her head inside a bag took her mind off it. Unlike Oskar, who had spent time with his head in a fish tank practicing, this was new to Ferdie, and she found that she was breathing in and holding her breath, reluctant to let the precious lungful go. Reminding herself yet again to *breathe out*, Ferdie peered through the thick green glass, looking for the rope. It swam into view, she grabbed it, and then, hand over hand, slowly pulled herself downward, telling herself: *breathe in . . . breathe out . . . breathe in . . . breathe out . . . breathe in . . . breathe out . . .*

The mantra took her safely down to the seabed, where to her surprise she found Oskar with a green glowstick waiting for her. *I knew you'd come*, he signed.

Horrible boy, Ferdie signed. And then, tapping her bag, *These work*.

Of course, Oskar signed, and then, *Shall we go and find Tod?*

Ferdie gave the “okay” sign. She took Oskar’s outstretched hand and together they stepped into the belly of the Metal Fish. At once they found themselves surrounded by a cloud of little lights.

Fish! Ferdie signed excitedly.

Teeth, Oskar replied, somewhat less excitedly.

The fish surrounded them. They were less respectful than they had been with Tod: Oskar’s light was dimmer, which meant that he was clearly a fish of lesser importance. But the fish were on a mission: their leader was in trouble and they needed a bigger fish to help. Oskar would do nicely. Ferdie, without a light, they did not recognize as a separate being. They assumed, because she was joined to one of Oskar’s fins, that she was part of Oskar. And so, nudged and poked, with spiny teeth only inches away from his precious air bag, Oskar had little choice but to go where the Sprite fish wished. And where Oskar went, Ferdie went too. The Sprite fish propelled them across the floor of the starship and then upward and through the hole in the stern bulkhead into the tail section.

On the other side they were met with clouds of swirling sand through which, far below, they glimpsed the dim glow from Tod’s discarded **FlashLight**.

Trouble. Ferdie signed one-handed.

They sank quickly through the water, following the fish, and they very soon saw exactly what trouble Tod was in. She was, in slow motion,

fighting off a Kraan using a long pole and the moves that Marwick had shown them only a few days earlier. Oskar and Ferdie moved toward Tod as fast as they could—which was nightmarishly slow—but as they drew near, through the clouds of sand they saw that they were too late. The Kraan had knocked the pole from Tod’s hands and was leaning over her, its bony hands about to grab her throat.

“No!” Oskar screamed, the sound almost deafening inside his bag. He rushed forward, tripped and fell headlong. Ferdie came cannoning down after him. When they looked up they saw Tod on her knees staring at something in her hands.

Back at the Wizard Tower Septimus and Marcia hugged each other in relief. On the floor of the **Sealed Cell**, six evil-looking red beads rolled slowly into a corner.

Newt Makken staggered out, pale with shock. “It worked,” he whispered. “The **Reverse** worked.”

“It did indeed,” Marcia said. “Well done, Newt. It was a brave thing you did, to go into the **Sealed Cell** alone.”

“And get the **Reverse** right the first time too,” added Septimus. “You kept a cool head.”

But Newt’s head felt anything but cool—it was spinning and making strange buzzing noises. Very slowly, Newt slid to the floor in a faint. A small, tattered book titled *How to Fix Things You Wish You’d Never Done* dropped from his grasp and fell at Septimus’s feet. Septimus picked it up and put it in his pocket. It was one of the most useful books he had come across in a long time—full of all kinds of **Darke Reverses**.

Marcia and Septimus carried Newt back into the **Darke Archives**. They laid him on the floor, covered him with a blanket, and got back to work.

“I hope we were in time,” Septimus said somberly as they began to tidy the chaotic mess of books and papers that had been discarded in increasing desperation.

Marcia smiled at him. “You know,” she said, “I have the strangest feeling that we were—*just in time*.”

THE SIEVE

Tod was staring in disbelief at six red beads lying in her cupped palms when she became aware of two more figures coming toward her. She leaped up and wheeled around, expecting yet more trouble.

Never in her craziest dreams had Tod expected to meet Ferdie and Oskar on the seabed. But as soon as she saw them, even with their bizarre air bags, running in comical slow motion toward her, Tod knew it was them. She spat out a spurt of water in a huge laugh. *Potato heads*, she signed.

A large, toothy fish positioned itself between them, as though protecting Tod, and Oskar returned the compliment: *Fishface*.

Where's the beast? Ferdie signed anxiously. She did not have a sign for Kraan.

Tod showed her the six red beads. *Here*, she signed.

Oskar and Ferdie were impressed. *Good Magyk*, they signed.

Yes, Tod signed. *But not mine*. She grabbed their hands and held them tight. *So pleased you are here*, she signed. And then she added, *Egg*.

Egg? Ferdie and Oskar signed in unison.

Egg, Tod confirmed. And then added, *I hope*.

Tod led them to the cleared patch of sand, beneath which the Orm pod lay. Proudly, she shone her **FlashLight** on the orange circle with its central dot and then onto the StarChaser still sitting crooked in the lock. With a sense of awe, wondering who had been the last person to do this, Tod pushed the StarChaser home into its bed. She felt a click and then, beneath her hands, a buzzing began. The sand began to move. Tod stepped back and very slowly a round hatch opened at their feet.

Tod stared down in utter disappointment. Below was an obviously empty chamber. There was no Egg. But she could not bear to give up after coming so far. Maybe, she thought, there was a hidden compartment within, where an Egg might still be lying. *I'm going in to check*, she signed.

Not without us, Ferdie signed.

Right, Oskar agreed.

Tod dropped down through the hatch first, her feet finding solid, smooth metal beneath them; then she moved to one side to allow Oskar and Ferdie to follow. The chamber was easily big enough for three, even with two

potato heads. Tod let her **FlashLight** beam roam around the smooth, gray walls of the chamber, but there was nothing to be seen and no hatch leading to anywhere else. It was an empty dead end.

She shook her head desolately and signed, *Nothing. After all this. We find nothing.*

But Ferdie was not so sure. *Move your big feet*, she signed to Oskar.

Move your own, he returned irritably.

I already have, she replied. *But you've just stood there all the time like a lemon. Move.*

Now Oskar understood. He stepped away and beneath his boots was another StarChaser indentation.

Ferdie tapped Tod on the shoulder. *Found it*, she signed.

Tod was out of the chamber and back with the StarChaser in seconds. Ferdie held her **FlashLight** while Tod dropped the StarChaser into the lock. Once more there was a vibration, and a buzzing that sent ripples through the water. And then, to their horror, the hatch above them closed.

They looked at one other, shocked: they had expected an opening, not a closing. Tod dropped to her knees to pull the StarChaser out of its lock, but it fitted so tightly that it seemed to have become part of the metal floor. Tod looked up at Ferdie and Oskar; the air bags over their heads no longer seemed quite so comical. She wondered how much air they had left.

Oskar had just sneaked a look at his timepiece and he knew exactly: four minutes and fifty seconds. He fell to his knees and was trying desperately to pry the StarChaser out with the point of his knife when a vibration began to spread through the metal beneath him and he became aware of a disturbance in the water. Oskar looked up at the hatch, but it was still firmly closed. However, within the pod, something very strange was happening. From the smooth metal encasing them a mass of tiny bubbles were streaming out, turning the water a dense milky white.

Oskar's hand found Ferdie's and Tod's hand found Oskar's. They held tight to one another as all around them bubbles whirled, lifting them off their feet, taking them up into a powerful eddy. Ferdie and Oskar could see nothing out of their glass windows for they were now covered with tiny air bubbles, but Tod had no such trouble. To her amazement she saw a big silver bubble of air forming just above her head in the top of the chamber;

she felt warm air touch her hair and then suddenly she was coughing, spluttering, retching as her breathing made the transition from gills to lungs.

Tod took her first breath of ancient air and gagged with the taste of metal. She let go of Ferdie's hand and wiped her friend's visor. *Air*, she signed. *You can breathe!*

By the time Ferdie and Oskar had taken off their air bags the three were standing in an empty chamber full of stale but wonderfully warm air. Like a snake gratefully leaving its old skin, Tod shucked off her waterproofs, and as fast as the water cascaded from their clothes it was sucked into what they could now see were thousands of minute holes covering the chamber wall—they were inside a giant sieve.

“What is this?” Oskar whispered.

As if in answer to his question, a zigzag pattern appeared on the side of the sieve like a crack in an eggshell. It rapidly widened, the two sides swinging away from each other in a smooth, spiraling motion so fast that seconds later they were looking into the strangest space any of them had ever seen.

THE POD

“Wow,” Oskar murmured. “Look at all those lights! It's just like MidWinter's Eve with lots of tiny candles in the window.”

“And there's a seat, too, so you can watch them,” said Ferdie.

They were inside a small, spherical space lit by tiny white spots of light, randomly flicking on and off. The lights were ranged along a broad, slightly angled shelf, in front of which was a long bench seat in blue padded leather. The seat was shaped to fit five and had an unusually high back, topped with five shiny black tubes.

But Tod had eyes only for the dull metal ovoid that sat behind the seat. She felt shivery with excitement, for stamped upon it was a large circle with a dot in the middle: *Egg*.

It did not take Tod long to see the telltale StarChaser indentation in the center of the dot. She easily retrieved the StarChaser from the floor of the sieve—with its job done it was already half out of its bed. Then, with her

hands trembling with excitement and Ferdie and Oskar breathing down her neck, she pushed the StarChaser into the middle of the dot.

Like the lid of an ancient tomb, the top half of the metal ovoid slid slowly back. Breathless with excitement, they peered into the depths to see, like the egg of a bird cradled in a nest of down, an Orm Egg lying in a cloud of white padding molded to its shape. The Egg's brilliant blue color shot through with fine streaks of gold was a shock after the monochrome of the silvery black that surrounded them. Hardly able to believe it was real, Tod reached out to touch the Egg. She felt its smooth, leathery surface, cool to her touch, and she knew she wasn't dreaming. She turned around to Oskar and Ferdie. "It's an Orm Egg," she whispered. "*It really is.*"

Ferdie and Oskar were just as wide-eyed. "You did it," Oskar said. "You really did it. You found an Orm Egg."

"We did it," Tod corrected. She gazed down at the beautiful lapis egg, taking it in. They had an Orm Egg. There was no sorcerer to snatch it from them, no dragon to whisk it away. It was theirs and theirs alone, to do with as they wished.

"But it's sad it will never hatch," Oskar said. "Ormie could have had a little brother or sister."

Tod was saved from replying by Ferdie's brisk, sisterly response. "Oh, don't be so daft, Oskie."

Oskar turned away in a huff.

While Tod and Ferdie leaned over the Orm nest, trying to work out the best way of lifting up the egg, Oskar, intrigued by the lights, went to inspect them more closely. He sat down on the outside seat of the row to get a better look. As his weight settled onto the seat, he heard a faint whirr, and what looked to him like a large, flat snake shot across his lap and bit the other side of the seat. "Argh!" he yelled.

Ferdie and Tod wheeled around. Ferdie raced over to Oskar. "What is it?" she asked.

"Snake!" Oskar whispered, pointing to the offending strip of shiny black that had him imprisoned in the chair.

Ferdie was scathing. "It's only a belt, Oskie."

Oskar looked down at his lap and saw that Ferdie was right. "Yeah. Well, it *looked* like a snake," he muttered. "And it acted like one too—the

way it moved. It just shot across and bit that thing.” Oskar pointed to the fastening that kept him in his seat. “And now I’m stuck.”

“Of course you’re not stuck,” Ferdie said. She went around the other end of the bench and shuffled along until she was sitting next to Oskar so she could release him. And as soon as Ferdie sat down another black snake shot across her lap and bit the side of *her* seat.

“Argh!” yelled Ferdie.

“See?” Oskar said triumphantly. “I *told* you.”

The two lap belts refused to come free. They also utterly resisted the attempts of Oskar’s knife to cut through them.

“I think,” Tod said, trying to figure out how they worked, “there’s a release button where it goes into the holder thingy. See, here . . .” She pressed the button on top of the fixing for Oskar’s lap belt. There was yet another whirr and the shiny, fat, black tube at the top of his seat back detached itself and in a fast, smooth motion swung over Oskar’s head and came to a halt resting gently on the front of his shoulders. Oskar was now effectively pinned to the seat.

“Thanks, Tod,” Oskar said. “That was *really helpful*.” He shoved the heel of his hand under the tube and pushed up with all his strength, trying to lever it up. It would not budge.

“Trust you to get stuck, Oskar,” Ferdie said irritably.

“It’s not *my* fault,” Oskar replied petulantly. “The seat did it. And *Tod*. All I did was sit down, same as you.”

“I only sat down because I was trying to help you,” Ferdie said snappily. “Can’t think why I bothered.”

Tod could hardly believe her two friends had been silly enough to get in such a mess. But there was nothing to be done but to get them out of it. She could hardly take the Orm Egg and leave them behind, however tempted she felt right then with them bickering in the background. Somehow, she had to get them free. “There’s another space there for the StarChaser,” she said, pointing to a star indentation in the dashboard. “Maybe that will unlock the belts.”

Ferdie and Oskar thought it was worth a try.

Tod closed the lid of the Orm locker and took out the StarChaser, then she shuffled along the bench so she was next to Ferdie, but not sitting down. She knew better than to do that. She placed the StarChaser into the

indentation and immediately it lit up, pulsing bright red. A whirr came from behind them: the hatch between the sieve and the pod was moving. It was beginning to close.

“Jeez!” said Oskar.

“No!” Ferdie gasped.

Tod’s fingers scrabbled at the StarChaser, trying to pull it out, but they all knew that was not going to work. Once more the StarChaser was sitting tight and was not to be moved.

The hatch settled into the entrance with a soft hiss, entombing them in the metal bubble. The pod gave a lurch, as though something had released it, and Tod fell onto the bench. In an instant, the lap belt had shot across and secured her, too. The lights inside grew dim, and Tod’s and Ferdie’s seat restraints swung over their heads, securing them like Oskar. All three exchanged uneasy glances. Something was about to happen.

A deep, powerful rumbling shook through their bones and made their teeth tingle. They clasped hands, closed their eyes, and were thrown back into their seats by a violent thrust. Moments later they felt as though they were in a giant ball, kicked hard and heading high into the air.

THE WANDERING MOON

It was Tod who opened her eyes first. Her sharp intake of breath made Oskar and Ferdie open theirs in unison. There was silence while all three took in the sight before them. At last, Oskar broke it.

“We’re flying,” he whispered.

“It’s so . . . *beautiful*,” Ferdie said.

What, in the darkness beneath the water, had been smooth featureless black was now—but only to those inside it—transparent. It was as if they were inside a bubble tumbling through the sky.

“This is from the Days of Beyond,” Tod said, awed. “This is what we used to do.”

There was a brief whirr, and they tensed, but it was merely the shoulder restraints setting them free and swinging back above their seats. They

risked tentative smiles; the pod clearly felt that all was well and there was no need to protect its passengers.

“I suppose we had better figure out how to land this thing,” Oskar said. He leaned forward and grinned at Tod. “Over to you—you’re in the pilot’s seat.”

Tod studied the panel before them, seeing how the random flickering lights had transformed to reveal a large, lighted glass map directly in front of her, over which a small red circle was very slowly moving. In the center of the map was a rounded silver stub, which Tod had an urge to press but dared not for fear of what it might do. The map was surrounded by displays showing a mix of numbers and red bars, constantly adjusting. Her StarChaser sat in its place above the map, outlined in a red glow. Tod thought of her promise to Rose to tell her if she found out what the StarChaser did. She reckoned she was going to have a hard time getting Rose to believe *this*.

As Tod sat in their bubble, surrounded by blue sky, moving through the white wisps of low-lying clouds, she felt exhilarated, but also a little scared. She was in the pilot’s seat, but had no idea how to actually *be* a pilot.

“You know what would be really, *really* good?” Ferdie was saying. “If we could take the Orm Egg directly to the SnowPlains.”

“That would be brilliant,” Oskar said excitedly. “Just think. We could save everything. *Today!*”

“Yeah, Oskie, it would be great,” Tod said. “If I knew how to fly this. Which I don’t.”

“You could use **Magyk?**” Ferdie suggested hopefully.

Tod shook her head. “This isn’t a **Magykal** thing, Ferd.”

“Yeah, Ferd, it’s a *PathFinder* thing,” Oskar said. Tod pointing out that she did not know how to fly the pod had brought him back to reality. Oskar felt scared—and when he got scared, he got picky.

There was a strained silence as the reality of their predicament began to sink in. They stared out the window watching the world move slowly beneath them. The pod had settled into a steady flight, low enough to see the details of the landscape below. Broad expanses of forests, broken by wide clearings with patchworks of fields and clusters of houses passed silently and serenely beneath them. Those on the ground below who looked up—and there were many who did—saw a dark sphere traveling fast and

silently across the sky. It was the beginning of many legends of a wandering moon searching for its lost light.

Oskar's words went round and round in Tod's mind. *A PathFinder thing . . . A PathFinder thing.* Almost absentmindedly, she took her now empty **PathFinder** from around her neck. She ran her finger around the silver band that had once enclosed the lapis dome while she thought: *Magyk may not work for a PathFinder pod, but maybe Magykal thinking will.*

Tod had learned from Septimus to hold an object and **Listen** to what it told her. So, as the land unrolled beneath them and began to turn into a series of small lakes, Tod slipped the empty band of the **PathFinder** onto her right thumb so that it sat neatly above her mother's snake ring. And then she **Listened**. But the **PathFinder** was silent.

"Will it show us the way?" Ferdie whispered.

Yes. The word came unbidden into Tod's mind. *Yes. I will show you the way.* And then came a question. *Where do you wish to go?*

Tod felt spooked. She glanced at Ferdie and Oskar to see if they had heard anything. Ferdie caught her glance. "Tell it where we want to go," she whispered.

"We want to go to the Heart of the Ways," Tod said out loud. And then added, "Please."

Point me to that place came into Tod's head.

"The map," Tod said out loud. "I have to point it at the map."

They stared at the map, trying to find the Heart of the Ways, but the landscape was meaningless to them, no more than a jumble of unfamiliar coastlines, mountains, plains and rivers.

"I think it should be over there," Oskar said, putting his stubby finger onto the far right of the map, "but it doesn't go that far."

"It moved!" Ferdie gasped. "The map moved."

Oskar was intrigued. He moved his finger across to the right, and the map scrolled with it. Oskar's finger had reached the edge of the map now, but he kept it pressed down and the map continued to scroll, slowly revealing more. On the left side of the map Tod saw the red dot of their pod disappear, and still Oskar kept his finger pressed, and still the map scrolled, and Oskar inspected every feature that revealed itself.

"That's it!" he said suddenly. "There—look!"

Oskar's nail-bitten finger pointed at a brilliant blue dot. It lay in the middle of a white circle that itself was almost surrounded by mountains.

"That's it," Ferdie said. "Clever old Oskie."

Oskar grinned.

Tod touched the tip of the **PathFinder** to the blue dot. The map did not react.

"Do what you did before, Tod," Ferdie said.

"Do what?" asked Oskar.

"Shh, Oskie," Ferdie told him. "Just wait."

Buoyed by his success with the map, Oskar did not react. He gazed down at the land far below, watching it slowly move by. It was an amazing sight, and Oskar thought that if he weren't so afraid that he would never walk on it again, this would be the best thing that had ever happened to him. Ferdie's fingers found his and they held hands in silence, waiting for Tod to do whatever it was she was doing.

And then, Tod did it. She took the **PathFinder** off her thumb and placed it onto the silver stub in the center of the map. "That," she said, "is where it wants to be."

The **PathFinder** settled onto the stub as though it were made for it—which, Tod thought, it probably was—and the map came to life. It was no longer just a diagram: it showed the world beneath them as if they were looking at it through a lens. The map moved, rolling back to where they were now, showing the pod as a small red dot in the middle, blinking steadily.

They sat for some time, enthralled, watching the world slowly scrolling by unfolding mile upon mile as they moved steadily across the sky, heading toward the Eastern SnowPlains and the Heart of the Ways.

After some time they saw a dark strip across the horizon; slowly it engulfed them and they flew into the night. The lights inside the pod dimmed until all they could see was the soft glow of the map, the gentle movement of the **PathFinder** and the stars above. In the warmth of the pod, lulled by its gentle whirring, they fell into a dreamless sleep.

Tod was awoken by a change of key: the whirring had dropped a semitone. Blinking blearily, she sat up. The sky was still dark but on the horizon she saw a line of orange fire—they were flying into the dawn.

Tod sat quietly. She watched the sky slowly lighten, deliberately savoring the moment and not thinking about how the pod was going to land. As the great orange ball of the sun crept above the horizon—reminding her of the MidSummer Circle—Oskar and Ferdie stretched and untangled themselves. “It sounds different,” Oskar said, immediately on edge. “What’s happening?”

Tod looked at the map. While they had slept it had scrolled across so that the blue circle was now approaching the silver tip of the **PathFinder**. “We’re nearly there,” she replied, doing her best to sound calm.

“We can’t be,” Ferdie said. “Look out the window. It’s just miles of rock. Where’s the snow?”

Driffa’s voice describing her world of snow falling apart came back to Tod. “It’s gone,” she said sadly. “This is what it’s like now.”

Ferdie shook her head in dismay. “I had no idea it would be like *this*.”

Oskar looked at Tod, fear in his eyes. “But how can we possibly land? We’re still going really fast.”

“But the *pod* will know how to land, won’t it, Tod?” Ferdie asked anxiously.

“Of course it will,” Tod said. She had no idea if that was true, but she figured it was a pilot’s job to keep her crew reassured.

The soft whirring of the pod had become loud like the buzzing of an angry hornet, and it now began rapidly descending the scale, one semitone to the next. The view was divided equally between bright blue sky and deep red rock, with the rock’s share rapidly increasing. There was no doubt about it: they were going down.

Tod knew there was nothing she could do to land the pod, but she could still look after her crew. “Lean back in the seat,” she told Ferdie and Oskar, doing the same herself. As Tod touched the back of her seat the shoulder restraint swung over once more. Obedient to their pilot, Ferdie and Oskar did the same. Sitting back in the seat they could see only sky, but very soon the bright blue joined a horizon of red rock, which rapidly began to fill their view.

“We’re going down into a crater!” Oskar whispered.

Suddenly Tod understood. “It’s not a crater,” she said. “It’s the Heart of the Ways.”

A rapid juddering began and once again they held hands, so tightly this time that Ferdie's fingers went numb. A thick gray dust began to blow upward and the windows became enveloped in its swirling cloud. A high-pitched whine kicked in, seeming to drill into their ears, and the pod began to vibrate rapidly.

"We're going to die," Oskar whispered to his twin.

"Shut up," Ferdie shot back.

Tod knew she had to do something, but she had no idea what. And so for comfort as much as anything she placed her hand on the **PathFinder**, which was now rattling on its silver stub. Tod never knew if it was a coincidence or if the pod would have stopped shaking anyway, but at the very moment her hand touched the **PathFinder**, the vibrations stopped. Seconds later they felt the pod settle onto the ground, tilt forward a little, and come to rest.

All was silent.

Oskar allowed himself to breathe again: at last he was back on solid ground.

DRIFFA IN CHARGE

With a gentle hiss, the shoulder restraints lifted over their heads and settled to their places on the back of the seat. No one moved. Dimly, through the dust cloud, they saw the steep rocky sides of the crater with a zigzag path, down which a lone figure brandishing a sword was running.

The devastation shocked them all. "We're too late," Ferdie said sadly.

"We might not be," Tod said. "I think it depends if there is any **Enchantment** left."

Oskar pulled off his lap belt, stood up and stretched. He was looking forward to getting out of the pod, back into fresh air. "There's only one way to find out," he said.

Tod put the empty **PathFinder** back around her neck, took the StarChaser from its bed on the dashboard and went to open the Orm locker. There lay the Orm Egg in its bed of fleece, serene and untouched by flights across galaxies and hundreds of years beneath the sea. With a great sense of

occasion all three lifted the Egg from its bed. It lay shimmering in their arms, lit by the low light pulsing inside the pod.

“It’s so beautiful,” Ferdie said.

“It is,” Oskar agreed. “And just think, inside there is another little Ormie.”

“Which is where, Oskar Sarn, it is going to stay,” Tod told him.

“You should take it, Tod,” Ferdie told her. “You found it.”

And so, cradling the Egg, which was surprisingly heavy, Tod walked into the sieve, while Ferdie fussed around with the StarChaser. They stood there, watching the pod hatch close, listening to the chamber balancing its pressures, and then watched the hatch to the outside hiss slowly open. The early-morning chill gave them goose bumps, and the dusty air caught in their throats, but no one cared. It was fresh and it tasted wonderful.

They emerged from the hatch to see Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful, running fast toward them through the dust, her braids flying, blue ribbons streaming behind her and a long, sharp sword in her hand. Driffa skidded to a halt and stared in shock at the sight before her. Stepping out of the fireball that had just descended from the skies was not some terrible monster as Driffa had feared. It was the young Apprentice of that treacherous, and yet so handsome, Wizard. *And in her arms she held an Orm Egg.*

For one of the few times in her life, Driffa was speechless.

“Princess Driffa, this is for you,” Tod said, feeling suddenly shy.

“For *me*?” Driffa said, sounding as though Tod had brought her an unexpected birthday present. Driffa reached out her free hand. “May I . . . may I touch it?”

Tod nodded. She was shocked at the change in Driffa. She was no longer the haughty, pristine princess dressed in pure white. She was grubby and disheveled: her clothes were thick and heavy with gray dust, even her hair was dulled to gray. The only pure white visible on Driffa was in the desperate glint in her eyes and the bones of her knuckles that showed through the skin as her hand gripped the hilt of her sword.

“It is indeed the true Egg of the Orm,” Driffa said, her voice soft with wonder. She looked at Tod. “I do not know how your ExtraOrdinary Wizard has done this, but I thank him from the bottom of my heart.”

“Oh!” said Tod, surprised. She decided not to explain how she had got the Egg; it was far too complicated. She held out the Orm Egg, hoping Driffa would take it quickly. It was very heavy.

But Driffa did not take it. As Tod’s arm muscles shook with the effort of holding the Egg, Driffa stood stroking it as if in a dream. “I do understand,” she said, “that he would not wish to bring it to me himself. I said many harsh words to him. Some were, I can see now, a little unfair. But please tell him that I am in awe of his power to **Engender** a true Egg of an Orm. And that I, and my people, are indebted to him forevermore. Never will we be enemies; forever we will be friends.” With a dramatic flourish, Driffa threw her sword to the ground—where it sank deep into the dust—crossed her hands over her heart, and looked dreamily at the Egg.

Tod could stand it no longer. “Princess Driffa,” she said. “Just take the —” She bit back a rude word. “Just take the Egg, will you?” Driffa, who now regarded Tod with new respect, did as she was told.

With the Orm Egg in her arms, Driffa’s authority returned. She refused to let Tod, Oskar and Ferdie return to what she called “the fireball,” telling them she would not stand by and see the Apprentice of such a powerful and heroic Wizard burned to a crisp before her eyes. To humor Driffa, Tod closed the hatch and put the StarChaser safely away in her pocket. As she did, she saw a look of relief cross Oskar’s face: his feet were back on the ground and that was where he wanted them to stay.

They climbed the zigzag path up the side of the crater, looking down at the scene below. Sitting in the middle of a sea of dust, the pod seemed tiny. Tod found it hard to believe that they had just flown halfway around the world in what looked, from where she was, like a fishing weight dropped into a bucket of sand.

When they reached the top of the crater Tod realized that the bumps she had taken to be rocks were actually Grula-Grulas. Their hair stiff with dirt and covered with a film of gray, they sat morosely staring into the pit that held the ruins of what had been the very reason for their existence. Some scratched irritably, some rocked slowly back and forth, and a few were making soft keening sounds. It was one of the saddest sights Tod had ever seen. She scanned the nearby Grula-Grulas to see if she could recognize Benhira-Benhara. There was no sign of his vibrant orange fur, but in that

dismal wilderness there was no color anywhere. Every living being was steeped in the dust of **DisEnchanted** lapis lazuli.

Silently, they followed Driffa past the sorrowing clumps of Grulas toward a small encampment, where Driffa and her entourage kept watch over the desolate remains. It was, Driffa said quietly, all they could do. They could not bear to leave. “Because when we go, who will ever know what this crater once was?”

Driffa settled Tod, Oskar and Ferdie in her tent, then left to, as she put it, “place the Egg.” They watched her go, treading carefully, cradling the precious Orm Egg in her arms like a baby.

With its rugs and cushions, Driffa’s tent reminded them of another in a distant land where, not so very long ago, people had watched over a different Orm Egg. As the weariness from the last twenty-four hours caught up with them, they sat in the doorway, drinking a strange-tasting, hot, sweet drink while they looked out onto the dusty landscape of the plateau that had once been covered with **Enchanted** snow. On the horizon rose a ring of mountains, which were still snow-topped, but all else was barren rock. Tod remembered the quiet beauty that had once existed: the blanket of snow, the lapis caverns below and the brilliant blue pinnacle above. It was hard to imagine how that could possibly be restored. Ferdie clearly thought the same. “Does Driffa *really* believe that the Orm Egg will put everything back to how it was?” she whispered, careful not to upset the followers Driffa had left in the tent to serve them.

“It doesn’t seem possible,” Oskar said.

“No,” Tod agreed. “It doesn’t.”

THE KEYSTONE

Driffa came back to the tent some hours later to find Tod, Oskar and Ferdie asleep: the cushions and rugs had proved too tempting. However, the Snow Princess was not to be put off. She knelt beside Tod and gently shook her awake. “Pardon, Apprentice,” she whispered. “All is in place. If you would favor us with your **Magyk** I do believe we will be successful.”

Tod sat up and blearily rubbed her eyes. She was so tired she would have given almost anything to go back to sleep—except for the chance to be part of the **Re-Enchantment** of the Ways. She left Ferdie and Oskar still sleeping and followed Driffa out of the tent. She emerged to see a wall of Grula-Grulas standing shoulder to shoulder around the edge of the crater. They were no longer the despondent, dusty creatures they had been some hours ago; now they stood tall, their fur combed and tended, their little arms linked to form an unbroken chain.

Driffa led Tod past the backs of the Grulas to the top of the path that went down into the crater. The Grula-Grula guarding its entrance bowed. “Good afternoon, PathFinder,” it said.

“Ben!” said Tod.

“At your service, now and forevermore,” said Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula. “We, the Grula-Grula tribe, can never repay you for what you have brought us today.”

“Thank you,” said Tod. “But . . . I’m not sure I’ve brought anything useful.”

“You have brought us hope,” Benhira-Benhara replied.

Tod was so touched she did not know what to say.

“Come on,” Driffa said impatiently. “We’ve got a **Re-Enchantment** to do.”

As they descended the precarious zigzag path, Tod could not take her eyes off the structure that had risen over the StarChaser pod. The dull metal pod that had carried them halfway across the world now sat beneath a flimsy scaffolding of wooden poles. These rose up some twenty feet above it like the nest of a giant, long-legged bird, on the top of which the Orm Egg perched jauntily.

As they picked their way slowly across the soft, dusty floor of the crater, Driffa, anxious not to offend Tod, launched into an explanation. “Apprentice, please do not think we have imprisoned your fireball in a cage. It just happens that it lies directly beneath the point where we must put the Orm Egg for a successful **Re-Enchantment**. You see, the Egg must be placed exactly where the previous one lay. You may wonder why it is not higher from the ground, for in our **Enchanted** days it was suspended some fifty feet above the floor of the Heart of the Ways. However, we are now standing on some twenty-three feet of rubble and lapis dust.”

Tod was impressed; she had not expected Driffa to be so methodical.

They had now reached the foot of the scaffolding where a long wooden ladder led up to the Orm Egg. Driffa took out a small, dull silver box covered in stars. Tod smiled to see her StarChaser box once again. “I thank you for the loan of your precious box,” Driffa said. “We must have one piece of what was here before to set the **Re-Enchantment** going.” She waved her arm at her surroundings. “But as you see, we have nothing. Not one piece of lapis is left, except what is inside your box.”

Tod looked at the StarChaser box, searching for a sign that Marcia’s **Enchantment** was still working—but of the purple glimmer that had once flickered around it like lightning, there was no trace. But there was no point worrying about it, she thought; they would know soon enough.

Driffa glanced up at the Egg, which lay still and quiet, awaiting its fate. “When we reach the Egg,” Driffa said, “we must lay the lapis on it to begin the **Enchantment**. But once its box is open your Wizard’s powerful protection will be broken, and I fear that the lapis will turn to dust before the **Magyk** has time to become established. My sorcerers tell me that these Earth **Enchantments** are slow and ponderous to begin and I believe that they are, for once, right. They offered to protect the lapis but they are not our best sorcerers—we lost those last year to Oraton-Marr—and I do not think them capable.” Driffa stopped and looked at Tod. “However, as the Apprentice of such a powerful Wizard, I believe that you *are* capable.”

Tod was aghast. If she could not protect the lapis in her own precious **PathFinder**, how could she protect any lapis here, at the very center of the **UnRaveling**?

But Driffa had no such qualms. She set off quickly up the ladder and Tod had no choice but to follow. At the top Tod joined Driffa on the narrow plank walkway around the Orm Egg. She looked down at the wasteland of gray dust below and then up at the circle of Grula-Grulas high above, imagining all the anxious little pink eyes staring down at her. Tod gulped. *This has to work*, she thought. *It really, really has to.*

Driffa flipped open the StarChaser box and Tod saw, to her utter relief, a shard of lapis, bright blue, with a thin streak of gold running through it. Driffa was unsurprised—if this Wizard was powerful enough to **Engender** an Orm Egg and send his Apprentice in a metal ball of fire to deliver it, then

keeping a shard of lapis **Enchanted** must be the simplest thing in the world for him to do.

“Quick, take the lapis, Apprentice,” Driffa urged. Tod closed her hand around the lapis, wondering how she could protect it. And then she had an idea. If the StarChaser pod could protect an Orm Egg for thousands of years, then maybe her StarChaser could do the same for a piece of lapis lazuli.

It was the work of a few seconds to put the shard of lapis lazuli on top of the Orm Egg and place the StarChaser on top of it. Tod kept her hand on them both, pressing them into the Egg’s pliant, leathery surface, flattening the area so they did not fall off. Driffa watched with a respectful air. It looked to her as though Tod were performing some deeply **Magykal** rite.

As Tod pressed down on the StarChaser, she heard the beginnings of a soft buzzing. It grew louder, swimming through the air like a swarm of bees in the summer sunshine, swirling around her and the Orm Egg, enfolding them in a blanket of sound. Tod looked up and saw the circle of Grula-Grulas, suffused with a **Magykal** yellow light. She understood that the buzzing came from them and she also knew that together, she and the Grula-Grulas could protect the whisper of **Enchantment** left in the shard of lapis and let it gather once more around its new **KeyStone**. Secure with that knowledge, Tod closed her eyes to concentrate. She felt her hand grow warm and a tingle ran up her arm. She heard Driffa whisper, “I see it, I see it.” Tod opened her eyes and could hardly believe what she saw—a flickering of **Magykal** purple surrounding the Orm Egg.

The **KeyStone** was in place. **Re-Enchantment** had begun.

A CARPET OF GRULAS

It was evening, snow was falling and the Grula-Grulas were singing in high, reedy voices, crooning long, slow and convoluted songs to the complex **Enchantment** unfolding in the crater below.

In Driffa’s tent they drew back the sides, lit a fire and watched the thick, fat flakes of snow drift from the sky and settle on the ground. And there Driffa, her friends and family, with Tod, Oskar and Ferdie as their honored

guests, sat under a bright, starry sky watching the spreading **Enchantment** to the haunting background of Grula-Grula music.

Offended by the success of foreign **Magyk**, Driffa's three sorcerers had retired early to their own tent. Just past midnight there was a shriek, and one of the sorcerers came running out into the snow. "Which idiot," he demanded, rubbing his posterior, "which total, utter *dingbat* put our tent where the pinnacle was?"

All eyes turned to Driffa. Everyone knew it was the Snow Princess who had ordered the placement of the camp, right down to the last detail. Nervously, they waited for the explosion of temper. But Driffa merely laughed. "I do believe it was me, Sorcerer. Oh dear, what was I thinking of?"

Tod, Oskar and Ferdie exchanged smiles. It really was an **Enchanted** evening.

The next morning was bright, sunny and full of snow. Princess Driffa led Tod, Oskar and Ferdie down into the **Re-Enchantment**. They were followed by a long, meandering carpet of Grula-Grulas ("carpet" being the collective noun for the creatures). They progressed through the new Sacred Chamber of the Orm, looking down into the space below where, deep beneath the newly **Enchanted** ice, the Orm Egg now lay.

Driffa then led them out of the Sacred Chamber of the Orm and down a spiraling tunnel, shining bright with new lapis. On the threshold of the Heart of the Ways, Driffa stopped and turned to Tod. "As PathFinder, you must lead the way," she said. Then Snow Princess Driffa, the Most High and Bountiful, bowed her head and stood aside to let Tod pass.

"Thank you," Tod replied, somewhat unnerved by Driffa's new and profound respect. She stepped into the Heart of the Ways and at once twelve torches burst into flames—as they always did when a true PathFinder stepped into the Hub.

They walked into the Heart of the Ways and gasped at the sight before them. It was magnificent. The new lapis lazuli shone a blindingly brilliant blue and gold. The Hub's traditional twelve arches, formed from rare, pale lapis and edged with thick silver bands, stood smooth and perfect, waiting for their first traveler. The arches' inlaid gold numbers gleamed from the light of torches set in solid silver holders between each Way.

“Wow . . .” Oskar breathed. “I forgot how huge it is.”

“And beautiful,” murmured Ferdie. “The blues and gold . . . so bright.”

“Without you and your ExtraOrdinary Wizard, this would not exist,” Driffa said. “From the bottom of our hearts, I and all my people of the Eastern SnowPlains thank you.” With that, the Snow Princess led them across the shimmering Heart of the Ways toward Arch VI—the first of many on their journey home.

In the middle of the Hub they paused and looked up at the roof. Enfolded in the center of its lapis lazuli coils was a dark sphere of metal: the StarChaser pod. Its cargo now lay above it, frozen in **Enchantment**, the **KeyStone** supporting the most complex Earth **Magyk** ever known. The pod had, thought Tod, at last delivered its Orm Egg, albeit to a very different place than had been planned. She whispered it a sad farewell.

“But you will see it again when you return with your ExtraOrdinary Wizard,” Driffa said. “Which I hope you will do many times.”

On the threshold of Arch VI, they stopped to say their good-byes. Driffa took off her lapis ring—the one whose gray dust she had flicked over Septimus—and handed it to Tod. “Please give this to him as a token of my gratitude and respect, and as an invitation to return to our snow **Enchantment** whenever he so desires.”

Tod took the ring, which seemed laden with far too many messages for her liking.

And so, at last Tod, Oskar and Ferdie headed toward the first **Vanishing Point** on their journey home. Behind them followed their guard of honor—a carpet of Grula-Grulas.

A carpet of fifty Grula-Grulas makes for slow traveling, and it was many long hours later when they at last emerged from a **Vanishing Point** to see a lantern, a door with a large knocker and a sign reading: *Welcome, Friend, to the Far Hub. Please knock and we will open the door.*

Oskar knocked. He saw the spyhole flip open, and he pulled a face and waggled his ears. A moment later the door was flung open and Jerra was there, his face a picture of confusion. “Oskie! Tod, Ferdie! What are you doing here—” Jerra suddenly fell silent. There is something about the sudden sight of a carpet of Grula-Grulas closely packed in a small tunnel, giving polite little waves, that leads to a temporary loss of the power of speech.

The carpet flowed into the Far Hub, the Grulas sang a long and haunting song of thanks, then all but Benhira-Benhara waved their farewells and went their separate Ways, requiring Dan and Jerra to open all twelve doors of the Far Hub. When the last Grula-Grula had left, they closed the doors with a sigh of relief.

“Well, Alice,” Dan said to Tod. “I have a distinct feeling you have something to tell me.”

“I guess I do,” Tod admitted.

With help from Ferdie and Oskar—and a long song of happiness from Benhira-Benhara—Tod told their story late into the night. Dan, Jerra and Annar sat listening in rapt silence. Jerra and Annar could scarcely believe what they heard, but Dan had no such trouble. He saw the **Magykal** green flash in Tod’s eyes, and he understood that his daughter was capable of doing all that she described—and more.

When Tod finished she looked at Dan to see if he was angry with her for defying him. “I never did promise you not to search for the Orm Egg, Dad,” she said.

“I know,” Dan said. “And that’s been worrying me ever since, I can tell you.” He smiled. “I’m so proud of you. And your mother would be too.”

Tod twisted the snake ring on her thumb. The mention of her mother immediately made her think of Aunt Mitza, which upset her. Was it always going to be like this, she wondered—would Mitza forever intrude upon her mother’s memory?

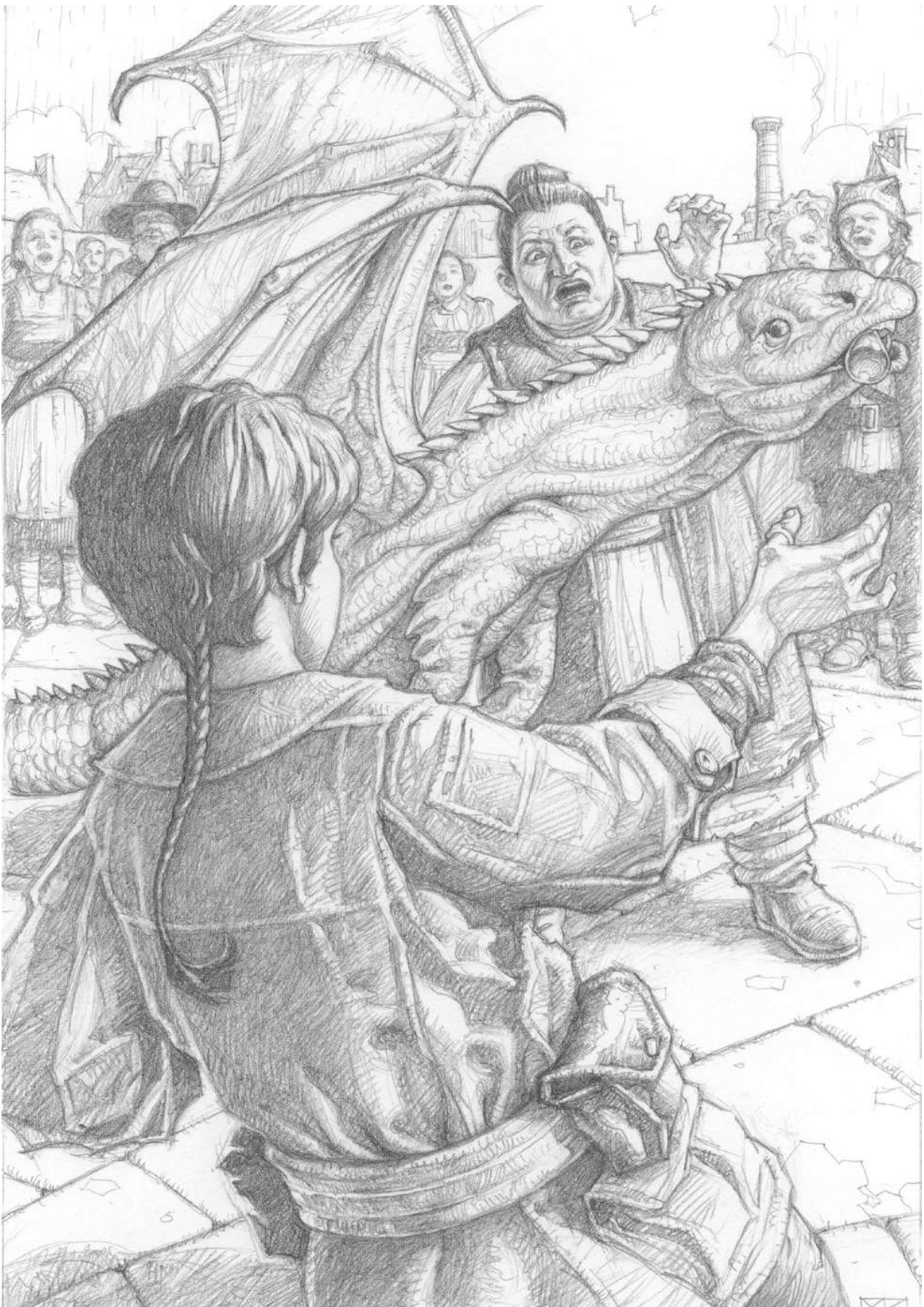
The next morning, longing to tell Septimus the news, Tod and Benhira-Benhara Grula-Grula set off back to the Castle. Oskar and Ferdie escorted them through the Maze and then they said their good-byes.

“See you MidSummer’s Day,” Ferdie said to Tod. “At the Circle.”

“No, before then,” Oskar said. “You’re coming back for your birthday, aren’t you, Tod?”

“You bet,” Tod said.

They gave the Tribe of Three sign, and then, followed by a ten-foot-tall orange rug, Tod walked into the next arch on her journey to her other home in the Castle.



PART XII

BING'S STRING

Simon Heap sat up in bed with a start.

Lucy was sitting by the window, where there was just enough light to knit by. In a moment she had thrown the knitting to the floor and was at Simon's side. "Si, what is it?"

"It's gone," Simon said. "Lu, it's gone!"

"Gone?" she asked.

"The dust in my eye. *It's gone*. Open the curtains, Lu. I want to see."

The summer sun streamed into the room—from which the dust most certainly had not gone. But that was not the dust Simon Heap meant. He took the hand mirror that Lucy offered him and stared at his reflection. Then he looked up at Lucy, who had already seen all she needed to. Her face was wreathed in a smile. "Oh, Si," she said, throwing her arms around him. "Oh, Si, your eye is blue again. Your lovely lapis has come back!"

Simon Heap laughed, and as he did the beam of sunlight caught the flash of lapis gold in his right eye. He got up from his bed. "I'm going to see Septimus," he said. "I think this might be important." Then he swayed and sat down suddenly.

"Simon Heap, you are not going anywhere," Lucy said firmly. "You've had a head full of dust and you've hardly moved for days. Septimus can come and see *you*. William will go with a message." She hurried downstairs to give their son the good news and send him off at top speed to the Wizard Tower.

Ten minutes later, a breathless and highly excited William Heap returned with his uncle in tow. As they neared the house, hurrying along with the sun glinting on the green water of the Moat at the end of Snake Slipway, Septimus allowed himself a small flicker of hope. Whatever news William Heap wanted him to hear, it was obviously good. He could certainly do with some, Septimus thought.

Suddenly William Heap's excited shout burst into his thoughts. "It's a ball!" Septimus looked up to see a small green object hurling itself out of

the water and come bouncing up the slipway toward him.

William had thought his day could not get any better, but now it had. William—already a good fielder for the Castle under-eleven cricket team—lunged at the ball, heading for a catch. He would have easily succeeded with any other ball, but Bing neatly evaded William’s expert dives. Suddenly, William stopped and turned to his uncle. “It doesn’t want me to catch it,” he said sadly. “It wants *you* to.”

“It does indeed,” Septimus said. He smiled. His nephew was turning out to have a promising feel for **Magyk**. Septimus allowed the **Tracker** ball to lightly touch him on the arm, then he scooped it into his hand. He was amazed at the sodden, soaking weight of it. It must, Septimus thought, have traveled beneath the sea to get to him. “Hello, Bing,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“Is Bing its name?” William asked.

“Yes,” Septimus replied. “Bing is a **Tracker** ball. It has come from Tod.”

William’s eyes widened. He knew all about **Tracker** balls. “Daddy’s got one called Sleuth,” he said.

“Oh, yes, I know Sleuth well,” Septimus said. “Very well indeed.” He looked down at the **Tracker** ball sitting quietly in his palm. “Bing,” he murmured, trying to **Feel** any distress emanating from it. “Is Tod in trouble?”

“Bing has string!” William shouted excitedly, interrupting Septimus’s attempt to read the ball, much to his annoyance. Initial readings were always the best.

“William, please be quiet,” Septimus said sternly. “I am trying to concentrate.”

“But it *does*,” William insisted. “Bing has a string message. Like I play with Ferdie. Look!” He stuck his grubby, nail-bitten finger onto the stub of string sticking out from between Bing’s threads. “You have to pull this out and see what Tod says.”

Septimus gave up trying to **Feel** anything. To stop William jumping up and down, he pulled, and to his surprise a long piece of string came out. “See!” William said triumphantly. “Untwist the string and there will be a message from Tod!”

Septimus did as William said, and to William's delight the string did indeed have writing on it.

"What does it say, *what does it say?*?" William asked, hopping from foot to foot with unbearable excitement.

Feeling somewhat overwhelmed by William's enthusiasm, Septimus gave him the piece of string. "You read it," he said.

William perused it, frowning with concentration. He was a good reader, but he had never had to read anything special like this before. "It says . . . *Mid . . . sum . . . mer Dragon Boat. Please land at Sum . . . mer Cir . . . cle. V. Imp . . . or . . . tant. Tod x.*"

"May I have a look?" Septimus took the string from William and examined it closely. He felt a mixture of relief and anxiety. Tod was clearly fine when she had written it. But something about her writing told Septimus that she was not expecting to be fine for very long—that something frightening was about to happen. "Thank you, William," he said. "You read very well indeed." And then he asked, "What do you think Tod meant when she wrote this?"

William considered the matter. He didn't want to scare his uncle, but he didn't want to tell a lie. "I think she was going to do something very scary," he said.

Septimus put his arm around his nephew's shoulders. "That's what I think too," he said.

"I hope Tod's all right," William said in a small, worried voice.

"So do I," Septimus said. Telling himself there was nothing he could do for Tod right now, he put the **Tracker** ball into his pocket and said to William, "Let's go and see your daddy, shall we?"

William skipped ahead with Septimus following him up the path to the red front door.

At the far end of Snake Slipway, lurking by the gate that led to the Palace wood, the square figure of Mitza Draddenmora Draa watched the ExtraOrdinary Wizard go into his brother's house.

Mitza had spent the last three days hiding in the Palace attics, sneaking down to the kitchens at night. She had enjoyed her solitary time and had made surreptitious forays to the Wizard Tower in search of her quarry, but had always been stymied by the interfering doorkeeper, who had insisted

that Alice TodHunter Moon had run away. That was a lie and Mitza knew it; her step-niece was not the running-away kind. Twice Mitza had tried to get past the doorman and go in search of her, but twice she had been discovered and he had called the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, forcing her to make a run for it.

But now, at the sight of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard safely out of the way, a smile spread across Mitza's thin lips—this was the chance she had been waiting for. She would walk right into the Wizard Tower, and this time there would be no one the meddling doorman could call. All she needed was a few minutes with Alice; after that there would be nothing anyone could do—absolutely nothing at all.

Holding the little gold vial tightly in her hand, Mitza set off up Wizard Way as fast as she could. The heaviness she was increasingly feeling on her shoulders made it hard going, but determined to seize her chance, Mitza pushed herself onward. Out of breath and sweating, she hurried beneath the Great Arch and headed toward the dauntingly steep marble steps that led up to the silver doors of the Wizard Tower. Suddenly there was a shout of “Get it, get it!” and a flash of blue shot by, narrowly missing her head. Mitza threw herself to the ground only to be very nearly trampled in a stampede of Wizards and Apprentices in close pursuit of what looked like a tiny blue dragon.

Mitza picked herself up and stared at the object of their chase. For a moment she wondered where she had seen it before, and then she realized what it was—the baby Orm. She watched it wheeling through the air, just out of reach of the grabbing hands, leading the noisy crowd onward in a frantic dance. Mitza checked that Tod was not in the group, then she turned away with an air of disdain. Let them chase the stupid creature, Mitza thought; they would soon find it was nothing but trouble.

REVENGE

As Tod and Benhira-Benhara stepped out of the **Hidden** arch beneath the Wizard Tower steps, a pointy-nosed streak of blue buzzed past them. Tod leaped backward, and it was only after she extricated herself from the soft

orange fur that she realized what the pointy-nosed streak of blue actually was—the Ormlet. *Alive.*

As she stared after it, a gang of senior Apprentices came racing by in pursuit, with Newt Makken leading the pack on yet another circuit of the Wizard Tower. Tod was pleased to see the Ormlet had not died as Septimus had thought, but she was less pleased to see that it was, as ever, bringing trouble in its wake.

Ignoring the shouts and whoops of the chase, Tod and Benhira-Benhara set off toward the Wizard Tower steps. The Grula-Grula was looking forward to the quiet comforts of his room and Tod was longing to find Septimus and tell him all that had happened. However, as they reached the foot of the steps, Tod very nearly walked straight into someone she had hoped never to see again: Mitza Draddenmora Draa.

Mitza was as surprised as Tod, but she recovered herself faster. “Alice,” she gasped. “Oh, Alice, my lovely niece. Thank goodness, I’ve found you!”

Benhira-Benhara, ever considerate, bowed to Mitza and set up off the steps, discreetly leaving Tod to talk to her aunt. Not wanting to be anywhere near Mitza, Tod went to go after him, but Mitza said urgently, “Alice! Don’t go. *Please.*”

Mitza’s desperation to seize her chance lent a genuine urgency to her words, and Tod stopped, uncertain what to do.

Hurriedly, Mitza launched into her spiel. “Alice, I told you I did a bad thing to your mother. But the truth is, I didn’t do it. You see, I’ve been in the power of that awful sorcerer, and he has made me do and say things I now deeply regret. Ever since I got free of him I have tried to find you and set things right between us.”

Tod was shocked. This was not what she had expected to hear at all.

Sensing her success, Mitza steamrolled on. “I wish to make amends. To return what I stole.”

“Stole?” Tod asked, bewildered.

“I am ashamed to tell you that I took this from your house. It . . . it belonged to your mother. It’s the perfume she used.” Mitza held out the little gold vial. “I am so very sorry. This is yours by right.”

Tod looked at the little gold flask glinting in the sunlight. She shook her head slowly in disbelief.

Mitza, however, saw the headshake as refusal. She took her performance up a notch and forced out a couple of crocodile tears. “I’m so very, very sorry, Alice. But I do understand.” Then she turned away as though she had given up.

The sight of Mitza’s dejected stoop, as though she had the weight of the world resting upon her shoulders, changed Tod’s mind. It seemed that Aunt Mitza’s remorse was genuine. “Wait!” she said.

Wordlessly, Mitza held out the tiny gold vial and Tod took it. The vial sat lightly in her palm, its gold shining softly. Tod knew how scents brought back memories, and she longed to feel that her mother was beside her once again. The vial’s silver stopper was sealed with a black film of wax; Tod twisted it and felt the seal snap. She was about to take out the stopper when she was aware of two things happening at once. One was Aunt Mitza stepping backward fast. The other was a sudden flash of blue, a close-up view of pink, rubbery lips, the chickeny smell of Ormlet breath and the unopened vial being delicately lifted from her grasp.

There was a scream from Mitza: “No, no! Not my vial! *No!*”

But the Ormlet was up and away, the gold vial glinting between its lips, with Mitza after it in hot pursuit—and following close on her heels, the Apprentice rabble.

Bemused, Tod sat at the foot of the steps, watching the Ormlet fly over the courtyard wall and the hue and cry chase it out through the Great Arch.

As a welcome silence descended in the courtyard, Mitza’s shout echoed in Tod’s ears: *my vial*. Tod suddenly understood what had happened—the Ormlet had saved her life.

In the Wizard Tower, Tod discovered that Septimus had been called away by William Heap. She sat down on the visitors’ bench outside the shiny orange door to await his return, listening to the sound of loud, regular Gula-Gula snores.

Tod was glad of time to think. There was now no doubt in her mind about what was in the little gold vial. She shuddered to think about what would have happened had the Ormlet not snatched it from her. Tod sat looking at the silver-and-gold double-snake ring that had once been her mother’s and felt overcome with anger. Her mother hadn’t died of some

horrible disease that no one could do anything about. It was cold, cowardly murder. If it hadn't been for Mitza, her mother would still be alive.

Some ten minutes later, a subdued and soaking group of Senior Apprentices trooped into the Wizard Tower. At the sight of Tod they stopped in their tracks and looked away. They stood dripping onto the floor, which went into a panic and flashed the words: *FLOOD! FLOOD! FLOOD!* in bright red letters across the expanse of the Great Hall. Tod noticed the Apprentices were nudging one another and heard whispers of "You tell her." "No, *you* do it."

At last Newt Makken was pushed forward. He walked slowly up to Tod, twisting the purple beribboned hem of his sodden cloak in supreme awkwardness. "I'm sorry for your loss," he muttered.

Tod, still seething with anger at Aunt Mitza, thought that Newt was playing a joke. "What loss?" she snapped.

Newt looked taken aback. "Um . . . your aunt. We did our best to save her. We really did."

Tod frowned. "What's happened to her?" she asked warily.

"Well . . ." Newt glanced back to his friends for help but received none. "Um, the Ormlet flew off along Sled Alley, down to the Moat. I suppose your aunt didn't see the water . . . She was too busy chasing the Ormlet. I think it had taken something from her. And so she, um, she ran straight into the Moat. And she sank. Totally sank. Never came back up." Newt shook his head. "We jumped in, all of us did, but it's so deep there and muddy too . . . We couldn't see anything and there was no way we could dive to the bottom . . ." He looked up and Tod was shocked to see that Newt had tears in his eyes. "Alice, your aunt has drowned. I'm so sorry."

Stunned, Tod took in the news.

As a final year Apprentice, Newt was not without **Magykal** skills and knowledge. "As she went in," he said in a low voice, "I **Saw** something sitting on her shoulder. It was a Maund. Your aunt didn't have a chance. No one could swim with one of those weighing her down. And a Maund never lets go, you know. I mean, its claws grow into your skin and fasten around your collarbone and . . ." Newt noticed Tod's bemused expression and decided he had said quite enough. "You'd best ask the EOW. He'll tell you. I really am very sorry."

Tod was shocked and just a little bit guilty at how relieved she felt—*Mitza was dead*. And there was something almost more important: now she could remember her mother untainted by the specter of the murderous Mitza Draddenmora Draa. Slowly, Tod got to her feet. She gave Newt a distant smile. “Thank you for telling me, Newt,” she said. “I’m so sorry you all got wet.” Then she walked over to the stairs—she had a promise to Rose to make good.

Newt watched her go. “She’s got a cool head, that one,” he said as he rejoined his friends. “Didn’t bat an eyelid.”

MIDSUMMER CIRCLE

It was three in the morning on MidSummer’s Day, the sky scattered with clouds and sprinkled with stars. Tod, Ferdie and Oskar were making their way along the long, winding track that led through the outlying dunes to the old beach on the sandspit. Each carried a flickering lantern and wore their Circle cloak—long and dark and, for the very first time, embellished with a five-pointed star across which was a scattering of dots: a StarChaser.

Behind them came a straggling line of all the twelve- to sixteen-year-olds in Tod’s village, every one carrying a lantern. They walked slowly and quietly, some apart, some together, the older ones savoring their last time at the Circle and the younger ones still a little awed by the occasion.

Tod emerged from the dunes and stopped for a moment. Before her was the wide, pale beach, and beyond lay the darkness of the sea. All she could hear was the gentle *swish-swash* of the wavelets and the soft padding of feet. She turned around to Ferdie and Oskar; they exchanged their three-fingered sign and then together they stepped onto the beach.

Some hundred yards away on the soft sand unwashed by the sea, Tod could see the circle of rugs waiting for them, just like last year. But this time there was the light from three lanterns rather than one, and as they drew nearer, Tod saw that the most distant light came from a lantern set atop the white marker post that only a few days before they had tied *Vega* to. The other lanterns were held by two cloaked figures: one standing in the middle of the circle, the other outside the circle, watching. Tod knew the

one inside the Circle was her father—Dan always took the Circle. But who was the other?

Ferdie and Oskar provided the answer. “There’s *Mum*,” they whispered, not entirely pleased. Ignoring their mother’s embarrassing little wave, Ferdie and Oskar took their places on the rugs reserved for first-timers and looked pointedly in the opposite direction. Tod sat next to them, then they put their lanterns on the sand and waited while the circle of rugs filled slowly with cloaked figures.

When the Circle was full, Dan Moon held his lantern high and said quietly, “Douse your lights,” and the Circle blew out their candles. Then, just as Tod remembered from last year, Dan began. “Good morning, PathFinders. Welcome to our new people,” he said, smiling down at Ferdie and Oskar. “Every year we meet in the early hours of MidSummer morning to hear our history and to understand the secrets that made us who we are, and why we PathFinders are a little different. These secrets are kept between us, and when we leave the Circle we do not speak of them to anyone else. Does everyone here understand?”

Everyone in the circle replied, “I understand.”

Dan asked Ferdie and Oskar to stand, and then very formally, he said, “Ferdinanda Sarn, Oskar Sarn, do you promise to faithfully keep the secrets of our PathFinder Circle from all who are not PathFinders and, more important, from all PathFinders who have yet to come of age and join our MidSummer Circle? For all time and in all ways?”

“We promise,” Ferdie and Oskar said together.

“Well said,” Dan told them. “Circle, let us welcome our new brother and sister.”

“Welcome, brother and sister, to the MidSummer Circle,” came the response.

Feeling somewhat embarrassed by the lurking presence of their mother—*why was she there?*—Ferdie and Oskar quickly sat down.

Dan began to speak once more. “PathFinders,” he said. “Our MidSummer Circle is the time when we tell the secrets of our history when our ancestors went to the stars. But up until now we have not told all. This was wrong. This knowledge belongs to us all. I understand that now, thanks to my daughter, Alice, who was brave enough to use those secrets for the good of us all.” Dan stopped and smiled down at Tod. Now it was Tod’s

turn to be embarrassed. She stared resolutely at her feet and wished Dan would talk about something else.

But Dan had not finished yet. “It is also thanks to our first-timers, Ferdie and Oskar Sarn—who believed in what Alice was doing and helped her to do it—that I now understand that the danger lies not in revealing secrets, but in hiding them. Rosie Sarn has always insisted that there should be no secrets among mature PathFinders, and so it is only right that she is the one to reveal them to you. Which is why I now give the Circle over to Rosie Sarn.” With that, Dan stepped out of the Circle and the cloaked figure of Rosie took his place. In her arms she carried a book that Tod knew very well: *The Path*.

And so the Circle listened, rapt, to Rosie Sarn telling the story of the Orm Eggs, the StarChaser, and the old *PathFinder* starship and its part in saving the Ancient Ways. At last, Rosie began to draw to a close. “And so it is true that we PathFinders have traveled to the Great Beyond. And it is true that our starship, our *PathFinder*, lies beneath the sea at the end of an underwater path marked by posts. The first post is over there.” All eyes went to the post, shining white in the light of its lantern. Rosie continued. “And here is more truth. If you walk beneath the waves, as Alice did, one in ten of you will reach our starship, our *PathFinder*. Those are the ones who have gills. But nine of you will drown trying to discover if you possess the gills.” Rosie stopped to let that sink in. And then she added with a smile, “However, no one now needs to risk this. One of our first-timers, Oskar, has invented a breathing bag that allows anyone to walk beneath the water. You can talk to him about that later.”

Rosie allowed a flurry of excited murmurings and then asked for silence. “However, you need to know that there are dangers within the *PathFinder* starship. An Ancient Way leads into the starship and many hundreds of years ago a group of young PathFinders was massacred by creatures who Came Through the Way. Alice TodHunter Moon herself was lucky to escape a similar peril. We hope that now that the Ways are **Re-Enchanted**, the **Darke** has left them and the starship will be safe. We will set up our first expedition, led by Alice, as soon as we can.”

Rosie glanced at the lightning sky in the east and knew it was time to bring the Circle to a close. She lowered her voice solemnly. “PathFinders, we have seen many worlds, but we have seen none as beautiful as ours. We

have seen many suns, but we have seen none as perfect as this . . .” Rosie turned around and pointed out to the sea. On cue, the sun broke the horizon. “This is our sun. This is our Earth. *This* is where we belong.”

The fingernail tip of orange pushed its way up from the sea, setting the thin line of cloud on the horizon on fire. It was beautiful, but no one was watching. All eyes were on a sky-borne golden boat with the head, tail and wings of a dragon, flying low over the sea toward them. Her iridescent scales shone in the sunlight; her head was high; her tail with the golden barb on its end was low, ready for landing. The already overexcited MidSummer Circle broke ranks and raced down the damp sand to the water’s edge. And then there was the Dragon Boat, sweeping down to land and plowing through the water, sending rainbows of spume high into the air.

The Dragon Boat coasted to a sedate halt some fifty yards out. Using her wings as sails, she moved slowly forward toward the shore until her bow pushed gently into the sand and she beached herself. With her head quizzically on one side, the dragon regarded her audience while one of her passengers—a young man in purple—put a ladder over the side and the other, a young woman in red wearing a simple gold crown, clambered down the ladder and jumped into the shallows. She was closely followed by the young man, and together, hand in hand, they waded to the beach.

Even the oldest members of the Circle, who made a point of being unimpressed by anything, were dumbstruck. The amazed silence was broken by Tod, who ran splashing through the water to greet Septimus and Jenna, only to find herself lost for words at the meeting of her two worlds.

“Hello, Tod,” Septimus said.

“I . . . I can’t believe you’re here,” Tod said.

Septimus grinned. “Well, you did send me a message asking me to come today. And it sounded quite important.” He took out the piece of string. “I think you said, ‘MidSummer Dragon Boat. Please land at Summer Circle. Very Important?’”

“Bing found you!” Tod said. “But you never said?”

Septimus handed Tod her **Tracker** ball. “I thought it would be a nice surprise,” he said, as Bing settled comfortably back into Tod’s hand.

Encouraged by Tod, the others from the Circle came milling around. As Tod accompanied Septimus and Jenna up the beach to greet Dan and Rosie, the Dragon Boat acquired a circle of admirers, all of whom—except Oskar

—had a keen interest in boats. But Oskar was equally fascinated by the Dragon Boat, for here was a reptile to rival the Ormlet. As the rest of the circle admired the seaworthy qualities of the boat, Oskar gazed up at the magnificent green-and-gold head of the dragon. And then, to his delight, the dragon leaned down toward him and, in a mannerism caught from Spit Fyre, she slowly and sedately winked one emerald eye.

TWO WORLDS BECOME ONE

The traditional MidSummer Circle breakfast had two honored guests that morning. As they sat at the long table set amid the dunes, Septimus had something to say. “Tod, Ferdie, Oskar: we can never thank you enough for what you did to save the Ancient Ways. Our Castle and our Wizard Tower are still with us only because of what you did. We can never repay you. Ever.”

“What we have is yours,” Jenna said simply.

“And what *we* have is *yours*,” Dan Moon replied graciously.

There was a smattering of applause and then one of the Circle was heard to mutter, “But what *do* we have?”

“Sand?” someone suggested.

“Fish! We have fish!” came a shout. The cry was taken up and soon the table was chanting, “Fish! Fish! Fish!”

Septimus laughed. “And you have fun,” he said.

“And you have courage,” Jenna said, more seriously.

“And you have us,” Septimus added as he took Jenna’s hand. “Forever.”

Sitting between her friends, surrounded by all the people she truly cared about, Tod felt completely happy. The two worlds she loved—the village and the Castle—had truly become one.

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Queen Marissa and Jo-Jo

Marissa and Jo-Jo's journey to the Red City was not uneventful. They were caught up in a Wild Way Wind, Jo-Jo was chased by a Kraan, and many of the Ways they tried to **Go Through** were already **UnRaveling**. But with the **Re-Enchantment** their luck changed, and on MidSimmer's Day Marissa and Jo-Jo arrived at the gates of the Red City. Here, Marissa took the Red Queen's crown from her cloak pocket, placed it on her head and declared herself to be the Queen's successor. No one raised the slightest objection.

The Wife of the Captain of the Queen's Guard

After the Red Queen had left for the Castle, the wife of the Captain of the Queen's Guard arrived at the Palace to beg for more time for his search. She found the Red Queen gone and the Palace in a panic. A strong woman was urgently needed to run the Palace, and the Captain's wife fitted the bill perfectly. She took over the administration and even held audiences, but she did not enjoy it. She was a sensible woman and well aware that she lacked the crazy charisma that the Red City demanded of their Queen. So when Marissa, complete with crown and a large following of excited fans, marched into the Palace, the Captain's wife gave her the Palace keys and wished her the very best of luck. Then she set off to search for her husband. She found him six months later, happily running a seedy bar in the Port of the Singing Sands.

The Red Queen

After **Going Through** the **Hidden** arch on the Outside Path, the Red Queen was also caught up in a Wild Way Wind. She became completely disoriented and lost. Without any subjects to terrorize, the Red Queen's life lost all meaning and she wandered wraithlike through the Ways with no sense of purpose. At some point she died, and after a year and a day, her

ghost resumed its wanderings. She became one of the most dreaded ghosts in the Ways, for anyone meeting her would be stricken with a fear that their head was about to fly off.

Oraton-Marr and the Lady

It was some weeks after Marissa moved into the Red City Palace that she discovered that the Lady and Oraton-Marr were still languishing there in a dungeon. Queen Marissa was so enjoying her new life that she felt able to be kind to the Lady. She set her free and even took pity on Oraton-Marr, asking Jo-Jo to find an antidote to the **HeadBanger**. The best Jo-Jo could come up with—from the top of his new sorcerer's tower—was a **Muffler**. Oraton-Marr wore it wrapped around his head like a turban; his headache was almost completely **Muffled**, along with any ambitions or desires. Oraton-Marr and the Lady spent the rest of their lives tending the Palace gardens and feeding Marissa's pet sparrows.

The Ormlet

The Ormlet never matured. The Languid Lizard **Charms** had taken away its ability to go into Stasis and so, much to Oskar's delight, it remained in its larval winged state. Many others, including Queen Jenna, Barney Pot and assorted Palace visitors, were less delighted.

Mitza Draddenmora Draa

Like all ghosts, Mitza had to remain in the very place she had entered ghosthood for a year and a day. Her ghost floated beneath the Moat, taking delight in frightening unwary hirers of Rupert's paddleboats. After that Mitza's movements were limited due to the rules of ghosthood, which state: *A ghost may only tread once more where, Living, it has trod before.*

Mitza took to hanging around Sled Alley and one day happened to meet the ghost of Jillie Djinn—an ex-Chief Hermetic Scribe of the Manuscriptorium. They struck up a conversation about Maunds and became inseparable.

Spit Fyre

Occupied with looking after his perpetual-baby Orm, Spit Fyre was not able to leave the Castle to find a mate. However, one morning late that summer, a young blue dragon—all blue dragons are female—was making her way home to her mountains in the Great Continent Across the Ocean. As she flew over the Palace she saw a handsome young green dragon far below. As she swooped down for a closer look, the green dragon caught sight of her and rose up into the air to meet her. Soon most of the Castle was watching a beautiful dragon dance being performed high above them. The dragons stayed in the sky all day. At dusk they descended together, each having at last found their mate.

Spit Fyre was ecstatic—the only worry at the very back of his dragon mind was the prospect of introducing his new mate to the Ormlet. He hoped it wouldn't put her off. But once his mate had recovered from the disappointment that the Ormlet was not to be eaten for supper, she accepted the spiky little creature with good grace. She also encouraged Oskar Sarn to babysit as often as he wanted. Soon, Oskar also found himself engaged in egg-sitting duties too. With three dragon eggs to watch, Oskar called in help. And so, once again the Tribe of Three found that eggs of a large reptile became an important part of their life. But this time, all turned out egg-xactly as it should.

THANK YOU

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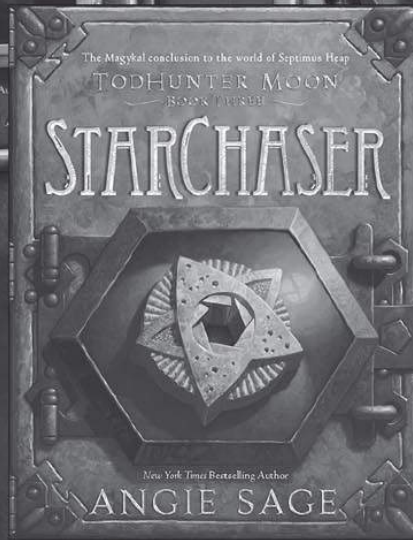
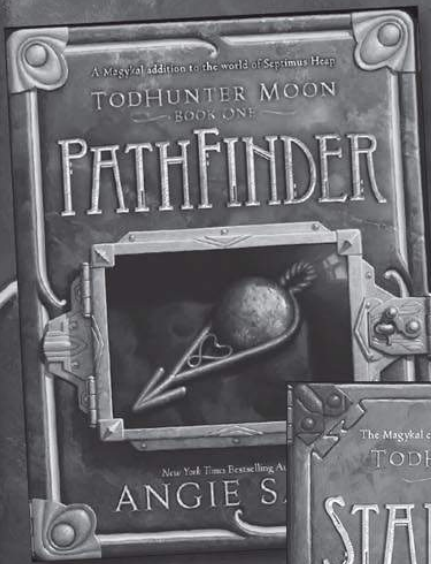
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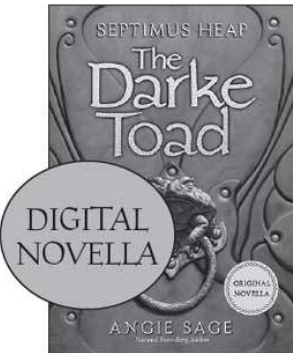
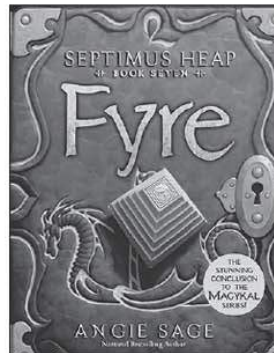
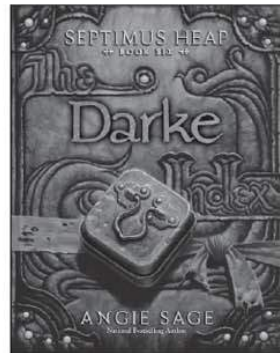
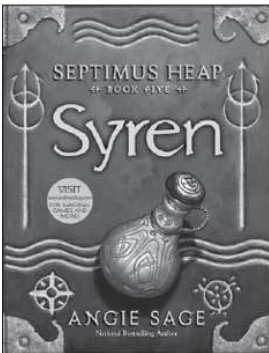
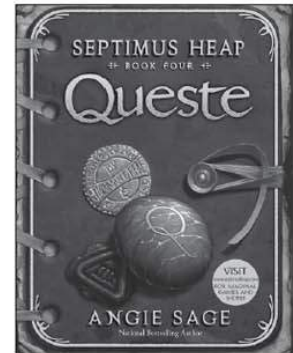
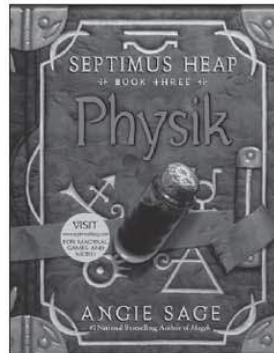
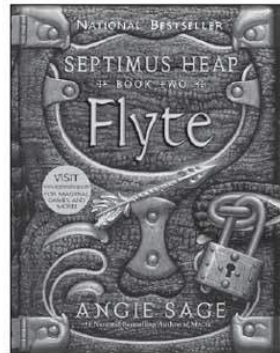


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